

“The Human Dignity of Women and Enslaved Persons in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: A Vital Dimension of Theological Anthropology”

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**Introduction:**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw many treatises published on aspects of human nature. Many of these focused on debates over whether a human soul existed distinct from a body, whether such a soul survived death. Such debates tended to be the province of theologians and philosophers, with occasional contributions by physicians or scientists.

The century also saw the rhetoric of the soul taken up in moral and political debates over the dignity, status, and rights of women and enslaved persons. In this paper, I argue that women and former slaves began to assert the full dignity of their souls, and to counteract existing narratives that rendered them as childlike or bestial in nature. Breaking free of such flawed constructs of femininity or African heritage was a vital means by which such thinkers created space for their own dignity, as well as fuller participation and empowerment in public life.

**Margaret Fuller, Nature, and Female Dignity**

Margaret Fuller’s championing of women’s rights and her love of the natural world may be seen as connected. In her 1845 manifesto, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she chafed at the artificiality of restricting women to certain social spheres, separated from the world of men and at a disadvantage.<sup>1</sup> To Fuller, such was unnatural, and thus she wrote: “We believe the divine energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages, and that no

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<sup>1</sup> Historian of feminism Nancy Cott has noted at least three distinct meanings of “women’s sphere” that emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century. Women as victims or prisoners of domesticity; women as forging an ideology of domesticity directed to their own purposes; and women as a distinctive “subculture among women that formed a source of strength and identity and afforded supportive sisterly relations,” anchored in the agency of women, not in the expectations of men. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 197. Fuller seems nearest to this third meaning, with a view to using it as a means of eventually subverting the notion of restrictive spheres over time.

discordant collision, but a ravishing harmony of the spheres would ensue.” Both inward and outward freedom for women should be “acknowledged as a right, not yielded as a concession.” Her plea was not “to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home.”<sup>2</sup>

Fuller was not merely concerned with a nature externalized and alienated from the human spirit. The soul became, for Margaret Fuller, the location of equality, with profound implications for social relations. In a time when abolitionist fervor was in the air, Fuller wrote, “If the negro be a soul, if the woman be a soul, appared in flesh, to one Master only are they accountable.” Merely human men could not lay down law to souls; such authority only arose from one coming as “son of God.”<sup>3</sup> On the potential for individual human autonomy, Fuller offered a personalized plea. “Religion was early awakened in my soul, a sense that what the soul is capable to ask it must attain,” she testified, “and that, though I might be aided and instructed by others, I must depend on myself as the only constant friend.”<sup>4</sup>

In her criticism of cultures where marriage customs reduced women to the virtual status of a horse, or even cultures where marriage is little but a “contract of convenience and utility,” she appealed to the enduring quality of the soul. “Were woman established in the rights of an immortal being, this could not be,” Fuller protested. A man would be less likely to regard marriage as a trifling matter, if indeed “he was to enter into the closest relations with another soul, which, if not eternal in themselves, must eternally affect his growth.”<sup>5</sup> This sense of

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1845), 26-7.

<sup>3</sup> Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-9.

equality at the level of soul was a growing component of companionate marriage, a shift in perspective promoted by many reformers of marriage in the Victorian age.

For Fuller it was “the especial genius of woman” to emphasize the inner life; to be “electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency.” This uniqueness of function was no threat to the notion of equality. “In so far as soul is in her completely developed,” she urged, “all soul is the same; but as far as it is modified in her as woman, it flows, it breathes, it sings, rather than deposits soil, or finishes work, and that which is especially feminine flushes, in blossom, the face of earth.” This feminine soul “pervades, like air and water, all this seeming solid globe, daily renewing and purifying its life.”<sup>6</sup> Although she partook of an unconventional religiosity, Fuller was adept at expressing conventional religious tropes, but deploying them in new directions. “I wish woman to live, *first* for God’s sake,” she would insist. She urged that “By being more a soul, she will not be less woman, for nature is perfected through spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

In a culture valorizing a woman’s body more than her mind, for example via the elevation of child-bearing, this was an important corrective. Fuller cried out of her era, “Now there is no woman, only an overgrown child.”<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, Fuller perceived in men of her age, “a tone of feeling towards women as towards slaves, such as is expressed in the common phrase, ‘Tell that to women and children.’” To such comments she protested that this would artificially restrict “the infinite soul” as working only “in already ascertained limits.” This attitude assumed “that the gift of reason, man’s highest prerogative, is allotted to [women] in much lower degree.” Thus “they must be kept from mischief and melancholy by being constantly engaged in active labor,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 161. A similar theme is found throughout *Little Women*, by Fuller’s student and friend Louisa May Alcott.

which is to be furnished by those better able to think, etc., etc.”<sup>9</sup> Fuller’s exasperation with such assumptions was here quite palpable. As historian Colleen McDannell has noted, “Tensions occurred when it became unclear how far women could go in pursuit of the proper education for their eventual domestic religious duties.”<sup>10</sup>

From Fuller’s own use of the term “soul,” we can see that feminine exceptionalism was her passion, only as a corrective to a long history of suppression, and as a plea for the liberation of women to realize their own divinely created potential. Among both African-Americans and among women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the soul was a vital locus of asserting dignity, independence, value, and a grounding in eternal truths. The insistence of the value of the souls of enslaved persons took on an even greater urgency as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed.

### **The Dignity of the Soul Despite Slavery**

Historian Philip Gould has shown the importance of the genre of the slave narrative to the overall history of the transatlantic slave trade and abolitionism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This genre was actually a commingling of several strands of literary appeal, which helps to explain the sensational popularity of certain slave narratives at the time of their publication. The spiritual and political impulses of slave and former-slave autobiography were intertwined in such writings. “The ability of black autobiographers to signify on religious and political registers simultaneously lay largely in the elasticity of the language they used,” writes Gould. “The Bible

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 22-3.

<sup>10</sup> Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 133.

itself provided a crucial source of the language of liberation—of salvation—that could be construed by black writers in highly creative ways.”<sup>11</sup>

### Some Male Slave Narratives

One of the most feared documents among slaveholders was the searing indictment of slavery known as *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, by minister and slave named David Walker (1785-1830) of North Carolina, and later Boston, Massachusetts. His address was given in 1828 before the General Colored Association in Boston.<sup>12</sup> This was published as an 1829 tract openly called for slave insurrection, and bespoke the passion for abolition that evoked fear in the hearts of many plantation-owners, leading to the banning of the book throughout the south. To Walker, whites had murdered millions of slaves, stole wives, mothers, fathers and children out of “devilishness.” They were continuing to “chain, hand-cuff, and drag us about like rattle-snakes—shoot us down like wild bears,” he fulminated. “They (the whites) know well, if we are *men*—and there is a secret monitor in their hearts which tells them we are—they know, I say, if we *are* men, and see them treating us in the manner they do, that there can be nothing in our hearts but death alone, for them. . . .”

The theological foundation of Walker’s rage became clear when he proclaimed, “Man, in all ages and all nations of the earth, is the same. Man is a peculiar creature—he is the image of his God, though he may be subjected to the most wretched condition upon earth.” Such conditions however are incapable of erasing from the human breast “the spirit and feeling which constitute the creature man.” The reason this is so: “because the God who made him after his

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Gould, “The Rise, Development, and Circulation of the Slave Narrative,” in Audrey A. Fisch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 14. [11-27]

<sup>12</sup> Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 27.

own image planted it in his heart; he cannot get rid of it.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the treatment of black slaves as beasts was a fundamental violation of their inherent dignity as beings created in the very image of God. Their natural response, per Walker, was to rise up, by violence if necessary, to throw off the chains of slavery.

James Williams, described the life of the slave in stark terms. He spoke of being coerced to “to whip unsparingly” each man or woman, “who faltered in the task, or was careless in the execution of it, myself subject at any moment to feel the accursed lash upon my own back, if feelings of humanity should perchance overcome the selfishness of misery, and induce me to spare and pity.”<sup>14</sup> Williams described in harrowing language the cruel whipping of a pregnant woman by an inebriated overseer. In his drunken state he “made no distinction between the stout man and the feeble and delicate woman—the sick and the well.” In fact, this was not an isolated case, as “women in a far advanced state of pregnancy were driven out to the cotton field.”

The full humanity of slaves, starkly contrasted with the inhumanity of their masters, is a common trope in the slave narrative genre. Williams admired one slave, who went by the name of “Big Harry,” because “the weary and crushing weight of a life of slavery had not been able to subdue” him. On every plantation, there were “individuals whose look and air show that they have preserved their self-respect as *men*, —that with them the power of the tyrant ends with the coercion of the body—that the soul is free, and the inner man retaining the original uprightness of the image of God.”<sup>15</sup> Here the human exceptionalism of the soul, as distinct from the body, remained intact. It was an essential component of the argument against slavery, in that the

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<sup>13</sup> David Walker, *Walker’s Appeal in four articles: together with a preamble, to the coloured citizens of the world, but in particular, and very expressly to those of the United States of America* (Boston, MA: D. Walker, 1830), 69.

<sup>14</sup> James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave* (New York: Anti-slavery Society, 1838), 43.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-4.

enslaved are more than mere bodies to be manipulated at the will of another. Their dignity inhered in a vibrant intelligence, an active and inner life, and an enduring will, yearning and struggling for freedom.

Perhaps the most famous slave narrative of the antebellum period was that of Frederick Douglass. He gave clear expression of the experience of slavery not merely as an adult, but turned his attention to the effects upon him during his own tender years as a child. The expression of anguish in the songs of slaves made a deep impression on Douglass at an early age. Such songs bespoke “a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish.” Such songs have had enduring appeal and depth due to the seriousness of the injustice they have decried. “Every tone was a testimony against slavery,” recalled Douglass, “and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.” The songs “filled me with ineffable sadness,” and drew forth tears, even in his remembering of them years later. “Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds,” he insisted. “If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery,” Douglass urged his readers to visit a plantation and listen to such songs.<sup>16</sup>

The hardest time of slavery for Douglass was under the master known as Mr. Covey. “Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me,” he confided to his readers. “I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed . . . the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!”<sup>17</sup> Even as a child, upon reading a book denouncing slavery and espousing human rights,

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<sup>16</sup> Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*, ed., W. Phillips and W. Lloyd Garrison (Boston, MA: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 37-8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-5.

Douglass thoughts of his own condition brought great pain. “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers,” he proclaimed. Contemplation of his condition through reading began to, in his words, “torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish.” In his youth he even questioned the value of reading. “I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own.”<sup>18</sup>

This unjustified reduction of slaves to the status of an animal, thus making the state of animal existence momentarily preferable to the lot of the slave, recurs frequently across the pages of the slave narrative genre. Yet the theme could be deftly turned against slaveholders, indicating that they had unwittingly reduced *themselves* to the status of beasts by their own treatment of slaves. Their humanity, not that of their slaves, was the one in grave peril.

The Rev. James W. C. Pennington, a minister in the Presbyterian tradition, wrote about his period of enslavement as an African-American man in the state of Maryland many years after his freedom. When asked why he undertook this task after this lapse of time, he wrote, in 1850, to undermine the common refrain among Christian promoters of slavery terms such as: “kind masters” or “Christian masters,” or “the mildest form of slavery.” Against such melioristic language he proclaimed, “The being of slavery, its soul and body, lives and moves in the chattel principle, the property principle, the bill of sale principle; the cart-whip, starvation, and nakedness, are its inevitable consequences. . . warring with the dispositions of men.”<sup>19</sup>

Most poignant of all in Pennington’s account was a letter addressed to his former master, in the year 1844. In this letter, Pennington stated that even in childhood, the injustice of slavery

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>19</sup> James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James Pennington*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: C. Gilpin, 1850), iv-v.

was apparent to him. “The nature which God gave me did not allow me to believe that you had any more right to me than I had to you, and that was just none at all.”<sup>20</sup> He took umbrage at the master’s treatment of his father, mother, brothers, and sisters, with brutal insults. Pennington held him to account in the following terms: “You struck me with your walking-stick, called me insulting names, threatened me, swore at me, and became more and more wrathful in your conduct,” indeed, “I had good reason to believe that you were meditating serious evil against me.”<sup>21</sup> Then in a standard refrain for evangelical preachers, Pennington remarkably pledged that he was now “taking the blood of my soul peaceably off your soul,” in a gesture of forgiveness. Lingering concern for his former master’s soul still welled up in the following words: “You are now over seventy years of age, pressing on to eternity with the weight of these seventy years upon you. Is not this enough without the blood of some half-score of souls?” Further, Pennington pledged with him to “remember that you are soon to meet those whom you have held, and do hold in slavery, at the awful bar of the impartial Judge of all who doeth right.”<sup>22</sup> The plea to his former master was therefore not merely a political one. It was a personal appeal, but one deeply and pervasively theological, and rooted in the terms of Christianity and sacred text equally available to both men.

Many more examples of the injustice of slavery, couched in the terms of humans being treated worse than animals, or being degraded to a place lower than that of common beasts, can be adduced. In Solomon Northup’s popular narrative *Twelve Years a Slave*, he described the attitude of “Young Master Epps.” Despite the fact that this figure “possessed some noble

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 82-3.

qualities,” he appeared incapable of using his powers of reason “to comprehend, that in the eye of the Almighty there is no distinction of color.” The problem was one of classification, often seen and reflected in scientific ethnographical texts of the era. “He looked upon the black man simply as an animal,” wrote Northup, “save in the gift of speech and the possession of somewhat higher instincts, and, therefore the more valuable.” Thus, even the slave’s communication abilities became commodified in the slaver’s reductionistic economic outlook. “To work like his father’s mules” including treating them to whipping, kicking, and scourging, “to address the white man with hat in hand, and eyes bent servilely on the earth, in his mind, was the natural and proper destiny of the slave.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Slave Narratives and Women’s Voices**

Slave narratives and narratives of former slaves authored by women were also an essential component of the African-American insistence on human dignity. Sojourner Truth described the system of slavery as “soul-killing.” She wrote, “If there can be any thing more diametrically opposed to the religion of Jesus, than the working of this soul-killing system—which is as truly sanctioned by the religion of America as are her ministers and churches—we wish to be shown where it can be found.”<sup>24</sup> Black exceptionalism, female exceptionalism, and human exceptionalism intertwined in her language of protest.

In an incident in Georgetown in which a streetcar conductor sought to eject Sojourner Truth from a streetcar due to her race, the issue of her full humanity emerged in bold relief. While accompanying a white philanthropist through the city doing benevolence work, Sojourner was pushed back by a conductor when she tried to board the car. “Get out of the way and let this

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<sup>23</sup> Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Philadelphia, PA: John E. Potter, 1853), 261-2.

<sup>24</sup> Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (Battle Creek, MI: Olive Gilbert, 1878), 36.

lady come in,” he gruffly insisted. To which Sojourner, in her inimitable style, replied, “Whoop! I am a lady too!” On another streetcar, the conductor took her by the shoulder and ordered her out. At this point the white philanthropist, Mrs. Haviland intervened. The conductor asked if Sojourner “belonged to her.” “‘No,’ replied Mrs. Haviland, ‘She belongs to humanity.’” The conductor then slammed Sojourner Truth against the door. “I told him I would let him know whether he could shove me about like a dog,” she recalled, “and said to Mrs. Haviland, Take the number of this car.” Upon hearing this he became more contrite. Yet the man had dislocated her shoulder, a condition so serious as to require a hospital visit. After complaining to the streetcar company, and with the aid of a lawyer, “the fellow lost his situation.” Sojourner noted the case “created a great sensation,” in the local press, and she quipped: “before the trial was ended, the inside of the cars looked like pepper and salt.”<sup>25</sup>

Harriet Jacobs was the pen name of Linda Brent, whose *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was long contested in scholarship on the question of authenticity. Recent research has uncovered the essential authenticity of the book.<sup>26</sup> The uniqueness of her story is in its willingness to expose in unblinking fashion the sexual exploitation of female slaves by prominent white masters. Further, the female voice must be included to counterbalance what was often a story strongly dominated by male authors in the genre.

At age 15 her master, Dr. Flint, began to try to fill Harriet’s “young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of.” The fundamental injustice of the relationship

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 186-7.

<sup>26</sup> This research is distilled by Stephanie A. Smith, “Harriet Jacobs: A Case History of Authentication,” in Audrey A. Fisch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 189-200.

emerged with clarity. “He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny.”<sup>27</sup>

The resilience of the soul, such that it was not ultimately ruined by such soul-crushing conditions, is another evidence of its exceptionalism and Harriet’s refusal to accept the treatment even worse than that accorded a mere beast. The narrative of Harriet Jacobs in fact turned the animal trope on its head. She wrote of victims who “make their escape from this wild beast of Slavery.” She decried the consent of northerners “to act the part of bloodhounds, and hunt the poor fugitive back into his den,” in a clear criticism of the Fugitive Slave Act, part of the Compromise of 1850.<sup>28</sup> Thus, far from being the animals in the slave system, the slaves were truly human, while the slavers debased themselves into bestial form. The entire system of perpetual forced labor could therefore be vividly described by Harriet Jacobs as “this wild beast of Slavery.”

### **Conclusion:**

The defense of human rights can only rationally proceed on the foundation of the conviction that humans are exceptional, body and soul. Treatment of humans as mere animals is a violation of their fundamental and inherent dignity as humans, and debases both parties in the transaction. The status of the soul was central to such protest. The soul of woman was not to be treated as a child, nor as a mere beast. The same plea was repeatedly made for the souls of enslaved persons. Yet social structures existed that continually reduced the souls of both women and slaves to a nullity, or accented a merely bodily utility, or construed them as less than full participants in humanity. Thus, the literature of the liberation of women and slaves found

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<sup>27</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston, MA: Author, 1861), 44-5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

common cause in the language of the soul, which implicitly and explicitly advanced the conviction that full human dignity is the inherent nature and right of all persons made in their Creator's image.

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