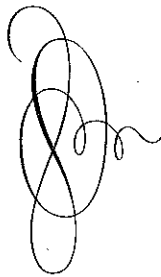


BLACK WOMEN'S  
INTELLECTUAL  
TRADITIONS

Speaking Their Minds



*Edited by*

Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway

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During Second International Convention of Negroes, August 1921," in *Black Writers of America*, ed. Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 569.

38. Moses, *Ways of Ethiopia*, 31; Barry Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 17.

39. Moses, *Ways of Ethiopia*, 31.

40. *Ibid.*

41. David Walker, *Appeal in Black Writers of America*, ed. R. Barksdale and K. Kinnamon, (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 152.

42. Stewart probably produced much of her oratory for the benefit of whites, although much of it was directed to Black audiences, as Wilson Moses suggests. See Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, 37.

43. Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 47.

### Chapter 3



## A Woman Made of Words

### *The Rhetorical Invention of Maria W. Stewart*

EBONY A. UTLEY

On September 21, 1832, Maria W. Stewart delivered a lecture at Franklin Hall, located at number 16 Franklin Street in Boston. On that Friday she "did what no American-born woman, black or white, before her is recorded as having done. She mounted a lecture platform and raised a political argument before a racially mixed, 'promiscuous' audience, that is, one composed of both men and women."<sup>1</sup> In 1832, it was unprecedented for a black woman to publicly decry the evils of racial oppression and to condemn blacks and whites alike for their declension from religion and the pure principles of God. Nonetheless, when Stewart spoke she was competent, fearless, and unwaveringly committed to disseminating her prophetic message. Stewart's extant texts are irreplaceable artifacts heralding the rhetorical and political prowess of the first black woman and the third American-born woman to address a promiscuous crowd.<sup>2</sup>

This rhetorical analysis of Stewart's public discourse considers how her attention to audience advances her intrepid political agenda. I argue that Stewart's inclusion of white and black, male and female audience members adds clarity to the complexity of her vision of racial and gender parity and participates in a tradition of black public dual audience construction commonly referred to as the antebellum black jeremiad.<sup>3</sup> After historicizing the black jeremiad, I will consider how personal and political events in Stewart's life prefigured a unique black female articulation of the jeremiad.

The jeremiad persists as a significant rhetorical form because it emphasizes American exceptionalism. Contemporary scholarship on American public address and culture must account for the perennial belief that the United States of America was and is a nation chosen by God. As Stewart's jeremiads call attention to the life experiences of a black woman living in America, she highlights the disparities and hypocrisy of a country under divine guidance. Beyond that, however, she also offers hope—as long as Americans perceive their fates as intertwined. Stewart's message of racial and gendered interdependence as a revised premise for American exceptionalism contributes to the bedrock of black feminist calls for social justice.

This chapter first explores the nature of the black jeremiad. It then considers invisible audiences or the readers constructed by Stewart, the writer of a political pamphlet—"Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on which We Must Build." The final section focuses on Stewart, the orator. Through an analysis of the utterances or specific speech acts of Stewart's public address, I explore how Stewart re-invented herself and her rhetoric to adjust to hostile physical audiences resistant to a black woman advancing a political argument.

### Black Jeremiad

Jeremiads or lamentations prophesying righteous retribution as a result of sin are named for the prophet Jeremiah, who urged Israel, God's chosen people, to turn from their wicked ways and restore their covenant with God. In America, the jeremiad was appropriated primarily as anti-bellum discourse spurred by the Puritans' belief that they were God's chosen people. Constructing themselves as the new Israel escaping the corrupt European (Egyptian) society, Puritan ministers monitored sins and preached repentance in order to ensure God's promise of greatness. Victory over the British in the Revolutionary War further confirmed for many Americans that their republic was indeed a nation chosen by God. However, for blacks who described American slavery as more horrific than the Israelites' under the Egyptians, the major victory remained on the horizon.

Black jeremiads consistently emphasized three core themes: being chosen by God, declension, and restoration, but in his book *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, Wilson Moses uses the specific term black jeremiad "to de-

scribe the constant warnings issued by blacks to whites, concerning the judgment that was to come for the sin of slavery."<sup>4</sup> In the black jeremiad, blacks situate themselves as a chosen people within a chosen nation, singled out by God to urge whites to turn from their hypocrisy and abandon the slavocracy. Whites, however, were the ostensible but not the only audience of the jeremiad. Stewart's biographer Marilyn Richardson notes that the jeremiadic tradition was "intended as much to hearten and edify the oppressed as to warn the oppressor" (17). "Despite" what David Howard-Pitney calls "its dark surface tones, the American jeremiad was filled with underlying optimism about America's fate and mission." Wilson concurs that the jeremiads' fervent language constituted "warnings of evils to be avoided, not prescriptions for revolution."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the black jeremiad was a carefully crafted discourse that served multiple purposes. On the one hand, it callously warned whites while it affirmed the black commitment to "the principles of egalitarian liberalism and to the Anglo-Christian code of values."<sup>6</sup> On the other, it provided a verbal outlet for black frustration, affirmed black humanity (slaves were not considered human), buffered the black psyche by convincing blacks that "God permitted but did not will slavery," and finally predicted an end to the peculiar institution.<sup>7</sup> Howard-Pitney confirms the duality of black jeremiadic discourse in his book *The Afro-American Jeremiad*. "The Afro-American jeremiad tradition then characteristically addresses two American chosen peoples—black and white—whose millennial destinies, while distinct, are also inextricably entwined."<sup>8</sup> Both black and white audiences of the jeremiad were accountable to God and thus had important social work to do.

Clothing shopkeeper and militant abolitionist journalist David Walker articulated the responsibilities of both races in his 1829 "incendiary manifesto," *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*. Born free in 1785 yet stifled by the oppression of the South, Walker vowed to avenge the degradation of African slaves when he left his North Carolina homeland for Boston. His most infamous effort was the *Appeal*. Peter Flinks, editor of a 2000 edition of the *Appeal*, describes it as "one of the nineteenth century's most incisive and vivid indictments of American racism and the insidious undermining it wrought on the black psyche."<sup>9</sup> When Walker wrote directly to blacks, as the title implies, he urged them to support each other and to strive for an exist-

tence beyond subservience. He expressed his motive clearly: "to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this *Republican Land of Liberty!!!!*"<sup>10</sup>

Walker's invectives to "Christian Americans" that upbraided their racism and hypocrisy were just as powerful. Walker admonished Christian Americans who "chain and handcuff us [blacks] . . . like brutes, and go into the house of the God of justice to return him thanks for having aided them in their infernal cruelties inflicted upon us."<sup>11</sup> Mimicking the biblical prophet Jeremiah, Walker decried the destruction of a sinful society: "O Americans! Americans!! I call God—I call angels—I call men, to witness, that your destruction is *at hand*, and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT."<sup>12</sup> Walker's vehement rhetorical style and appeal to black and white audiences inspired many generations of African Americans, including his friend Maria Stewart. Stewart's jeremiads borrow from Walker's language and are indebted to his passionate expressions. Nonetheless, her attention to the particularities of the female experience endows her jeremiads with a uniqueness of their own.

#### *Personal and Political Context*

A review of pertinent personal and political events will contextualize Stewart's entrance into the public sphere. Born in 1803 in Hartford, Connecticut, Stewart was bound out to a clergyman and his family after she was orphaned at the age of five. Between the ages of fifteen and twenty, she left the family, worked as a domestic, and attended Sabbath schools. When Stewart (then Maria Miller) was twenty-three, she and James W. Stewart were married in Boston. The couple joined Boston's small free black population. The majority of Bostonian blacks lived in a segregated portion of town called Nigger Hill. Transportation, lecture halls, and places of entertainment were segregated. Education for blacks was substandard. Although the Stewarts' community consisted of free blacks, they were still acutely aware of the liberation struggles of blacks elsewhere in America and abroad. *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in the United States, kept black Bostonians abreast of the struggles in Greece, Poland, Haiti, and the West Indies as well as of incidents such as the Denmark Vesey plot in Charleston, South Carolina (4).<sup>13</sup> In 1826, the Massachusetts General Colored Association was founded. It was "dedi-

cated to the betterment of local conditions and to agitation for the abolition of slavery" (5). It was also one of the first black organizations to have an international political agenda.<sup>14</sup> One of the organization's prominent members was David Walker. The maelstrom left in the wake of his *Appeal* resulted in a thousand dollar bounty on a dead Walker's head and his mysterious death in 1830. He died of either natural causes due to consumption or murder due to poisoning. Neither account has been irrefutably affirmed.

The impact on Maria Stewart of Walker's death and of her husband's death less than a year before Walker's should not be underestimated. Racist practices stripped Stewart of her inheritance and as an uneducated childless widow, her livelihood was threatened. Her experiences as poor domestic, middle-class wife, and teetering on the precipice of poor again widow familiarized her with the experiences of a range of women. Not only did this personal anguish influence Stewart's religious commitment, but the absence of male benefactors effectively removed all practical prohibitions from her entrance to the public sphere. In other words, no one could accuse her of leaving her husband to embark on a public career. Further reverberations of political events profoundly influenced her public discourse. The dire social conditions of free and enslaved black people, American Colonization Society agitation for emigrating free blacks to Africa, and Nat Turner's 1831 Southampton, Virginia, slave rebellion, his subsequent trial, and hanging all propelled Stewart into the public sphere.

#### *Stewart: A Woman of the Written Word*

Stewart's entrance into political public life did not begin with public address but with the October 1831 publication of her pamphlet, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build," published by Garrison and Knapp, editors of the *Liberator*. In 1835, after Stewart left Boston, the Friends of Freedom and Virtue published *Productions from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*. This publication includes "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," as well as essays, meditations, and speeches written by Stewart while living and lecturing in Boston from 1831 to 1833.<sup>15</sup> Since "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality" marked her entrance into the public realm, I begin by analyzing her written words. I believe Stewart was extremely cognizant of the

pamphlet's ability to appeal to unexpected or unintended readers. My goal is to illuminate the seamless transitions between her jeremiadic appeals to black women, white women, black men, and white men.

Early in the text, Stewart appeals to the "daughters of her people."

O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties. O, ye daughters of Africa! What have you done to immortalize your names beyond the grave? What examples have ye set before the rising generation? What foundation have ye laid for generations yet unborn? (30)

Emphasis on daughters of Africa as mothers of the rising generation reveals Stewart's persistent faith in black women as the foundation of black people's improved future. As we will continue to see, Stewart often models the behavior she would like to see in her people, particularly in black women. The act of writing "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality" exemplifies the temerity with which Stewart hoped to inspire in further generations. Stewart speaks to, for, and with the daughters of her people. As she delivers her prophetic lament, she asks nothing more of her audience than she asks of herself. In the tradition of the jeremiad, she exhorts, "But we have a great work to do. Never, no, never, will the chains of slavery and ignorance burst, till we become united as one, and cultivate among ourselves the pure principles of piety, morality, and virtue" (30; italics added).

As she continues to exalt black mothers' responsibility for raising virtuous children, Stewart employs an example of American (white) mothers who expand their familial responsibilities to include social ones. "The good women of Wethersfield, Conn[ecticut] toiled in the blazing sun, year after year . . . and procured enough money to erect them a house of worship." Stewart queries, "shall we not imitate their examples, as far as they are worthy of imitation?" (37). This aside about white women serves as a reproach. Black women's intimate experience with Christian white women's hypocrisy, their familiarity with difficult labor, their true closeness to God, and yet their inability to distinguish themselves should have shamed them. Stewart acknowledges that not all white ladies' behavior is worthy of imitation, but the work done to uplift their communities is. Moreover, this same aside about white women that motivates black women also carries a message for white women. This passage ingeniously unites Americans with daughters of Africa through the sacrifice of labor. Hav-

ing toiled for their reward, American women finally share a commonality with the daughters of Africa. Just as black women should have felt shamed at the American women's progress in spite of their hypocrisy, white women with their newfound appreciation for the rewards of labor should feel ashamed of their exploitation of black women's labor. Despite the shame, as is characteristic of the jeremiad, there is room in this brief excerpt for optimism—namely the redemption of black and white women. Black women must toil for their spiritual and social uplift. White women must learn to appreciate rather than exploit black women's physical toil.

The justification for interpreting this passage as an aside to American women is Stewart's subsequent chastisement of the gentlemen in America who shook the shackles of Great Britain yet refused to loose the shackles of "Africa's sons." Characteristic of Stewart's discourse thus far, before she addresses American gentlemen, she asks why Africa's sons have not shared the white fervor for freedom. Part of her message is reproach for black men who would not rather die than be slaves. Part of her reproach is directed toward white men who have so destroyed the black male spirit that it never occurs to them to prefer death over slavery. Stewart's reproach increases in specificity:

Oh, America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against thee. Thou art almost become drunken with the blood of her slain; thou has enriched thyself through her toils and labors; and now thou refuseth to make even a small return. And thou hast caused the daughters of Africa to commit whoredoms and fornications; but upon thee be their curse. (39)

As Stewart's jeremiad describes American declension, she clearly distinguishes between the fallen sons of Africa's "cruel wrongs and injuries" and the daughters of Africa's "whoredoms and fornications," all of whose injuries were no fault of their own. This passage increases the male and female children of Africa's indignation toward whites as well as increases their anticipation for retribution and redemption from God. Also, her persistent use of Africa unites them as a people with a shared nation. Shirley Logan, scholar of black women's discourse, explains Stewart's connection to Africa as an attempt "to reclaim an honorable African past that would place her black auditors in a superior rather than inferior relationship with Anglo-Americans."<sup>16</sup>

In the following passage, Stewart argues that Africans in America are like Americans. She confirms that they are a distinct people within a chosen people:

but we will tell you that our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired. We will tell you that too much of your blood flows in our veins, too much of your color in our skins, for us not to possess your spirits. (40)

When Stewart prompts her black audience to look to whites as examples, she emphasizes self-help as the fundamental solution to their problems. Scapegoating whites and begging desperately for white assistance are absent from her prompt. Instead, she challenges her people to return to God in order to release themselves from physical and intellectual bondage. Returning to God, taking pride in their race, suing for rights, and possessing the spirit of independence were characteristics of both black and white Americans. Implicit in this commonality, however, is a traditional jeremiadic threat. Her people may rise up violently as a result of their protracted mistreatment and as a result of the same love of liberty in their souls that inspired the American Revolution. The fervor increases as her argument gains momentum: "AND WE CLAIM OUR RIGHTS. We will tell you that we are not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that can do no more; but we will tell you whom we do fear. We fear Him who is able, after He hath killed, to destroy both soul and body in hell forever" (40). By closing her argument with an unmistakable invective against whites in the explicit and recognizable form of the jeremiad, Stewart ingeniously tempers her rhetoric by referring to the power of God. Even as she preaches militancy uncharacteristic of a woman, she embodies the prophetic lament of a prophetess sent by God who had no choice but to be a voice for those who would be lost.

Although powerful, the printed pamphlet "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality" lacked embodiment and thus was less threatening than physically speaking in public. In her essay, "In Praise of Eloquent Diversity: Gender and Rhetoric as Public Persuasion," Celeste Condit asserts that writing hides the body. Because audiences cannot see the writer, they may misinterpret the gender of the author. To be more specific, these audiences may excuse a woman for her masculinist rhetoric because they cannot see her. Condit writes, "In writing, biological sex may be made relevant, but in public speaking it is hard to make it irrelevant."<sup>17</sup> Such is the case with Maria Stewart.

It was unusual and for many contemporaries inappropriate for Stewart to write as vehemently as she did, but because she was writing, her gender was less of an immediate hindrance. In fact, I argue that her lack of embodiment as well as that of her audience permitted her expansion of the audience. Nonetheless, Stewart was rhetorically conscious of her engagement in a patriarchal practice. Her public addresses offer empirical evidence that the choices she made were grounded in an awareness of her audience and an awareness of how her audience perceived her as a black woman. In discussing the following four public addresses given in Boston between 1832 and 1833, I focus on how Stewart's utterances constantly adjust to the demands of the audience.

*Stewart: A Woman of the Spoken Word*

Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall

In her "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall" on September 21, 1832, Stewart commences the first political argument presented by a black woman to an audience of blacks and whites, men and women: "Why sit ye here and die?" Immediately, she asks her audience to make a decision. To blacks in the audiences, she is perhaps asking why they remain idle and suffer injustice unto death. To whites in the audience, she may, in a traditional jeremiad, be asking why they persist in their maltreatment of blacks and speed God's judgment and consequently their own deaths. After this initial rhetorical question, she clarifies her audience by directly addressing the black attendees. "Come let us plead our cause before the whites; if they save us alive, we shall live—and if they kill us, we shall but die" (45). At this juncture, all of her audience members should feel uncomfortable. When Stewart asserts that blacks have no choice but to act, she simultaneously warns the white members of her audience to get ready for the action of a group of people who are not afraid to die.

Characteristic of her pamphlet, Stewart is always already in touch with her audience and their whiteness of her femaleness. She adjusts by expanding the issue so that it becomes a matter of who, male or female, should be the representative for people of color. She poses two questions. "Me-thinks I heard a spiritual interrogation—'Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?' And my heart made this reply—'If it is thy will, be it even so,

Lord Jesus!" (45). Neither the religious reference nor the use of herself as a model is an unexpected defense for Stewart.

Stewart's call for action demands more than the imitation of herself; it demands an imitation of white virtue. She implies that if "the Americans free people of color" were more moral and educated then "the whites would be compelled to say unloose those fetters! Though black your skins as shades of night your hearts are pure, your souls are white." The repetition of this line as well as "I am a true born American; your blood flows in my veins, and your spirit fires my breast" assume more meaning in the presence of a white audience because Stewart uses her strategy of imitation to craft identification between whites and blacks (46). She enhances this identification by referring to blacks as Americans. In "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," the word "American" refers to whites only.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, this public speech strengthens the association between the races. Responding to the claim that blacks were lazy and idle, Stewart says to her white audience, "I acknowledge, with extreme sorrow, that there are some who never were and never will be serviceable to society. And have you not a similar class among yourselves?" (47). After issuing a clever identification strategy among lazy and idle blacks and whites, she shifts back to her more positive examples of imitation. Stewart concludes the address with references to the pilgrims, Washington, and Lafayette as exemplars that blacks should emulate in order to secure their rights and privileges (49).

Similar to the conclusion of the pamphlet, the conclusion of her public address speaks directly to a white audience, but there are several noticeable and strategic distinctions at the close of "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall." For the first time, Stewart asserts dependency and places women in a subordinate position to men. She continues to use herself as a model. She describes herself as one of the wretched women of her wretched race and makes a noticeable shift in her rhetoric: "It is upon you that woman depends; she can do but little besides using her influence; and it is for her sake and yours that I have come forward and made myself a hissing and a reproach among the people; for I am also one of the wretched and miserable daughters of the descendants of fallen Africa" (48). Never in the pamphlet or earlier in this speech has Stewart suggested that women were less capable of the self-help she demanded from men. In fact, there are several explicit examples in the pamphlet where she calls women to act for themselves and the futurity of the races (30, 35, 37-39).

This modification in her position on women is not an ideological shift for Stewart, but a conscious adjustment to the expectation that she be apologetic for leaving her place at home and presenting her unwomanly argument before the public. Reverting to the burgeoning ideology of domesticity allowed Stewart to suggest that she was only a lowly woman with a motherly concern for her people. This choice is not a weakness but an acute awareness of the tropes available to her as a woman. In the same way that she uses religion and domesticity as justification, Stewart looks for and finds other means of increasingly secular justification for her entrance into the Boston lecture circuit.

#### Address Delivered Before The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America

In "Address Delivered Before The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America," given in the spring of 1832, Stewart focuses her entire message on womanhood.<sup>19</sup> Speaking to an audience primarily of black women, she addresses them intimately. "I am not your enemy, but a friend both to you and to your children. Suffer me, then, to express my sentiments but this once, however severe they may appear to be, and then hereafter let me sink into oblivion, and let my name die in forgetfulness" (52). Then she begins to speak not so much to an audience of friends, but of family.

It appears to me that there are no people under the heavens so unkind and so unfeeling towards their own, as are the descendants of fallen Africa. I have been something of a traveller in my day; and the general cry among the people is, 'Our own color are our greatest opposers;' and even the whites say that we are greater enemies towards each other, than they are towards us. (53)

This familial warning about internal divisions among her people is consistent with her rhetoric and appropriate for an intimate address. Such a discussion of internal strife is absent from her first message to a mixed audience. Only in the presence of family can one speak in love about their greatest flaws. Otherwise, a severe reproach, like the one that follows, would lead to public embarrassment.

And why is it, my friends, that we are despised above all the nations upon the earth? Is it merely because our skins are tinged with a sable hue? No, nor will I ever believe that it is. What then is it? Oh, it is because many of



us now possess that envious and malicious disposition, that we had rather die than see each other rise an inch above a beggar. (54)

Knowing that Stewart often used herself as a model, one could also assume that these persistent references to internal strife might have paralleled conflicts between Stewart and some of the black women in her audience.

In a final call for redemption, Stewart concludes with "O woman, woman! Upon you I call; for upon your exertions almost entirely depends whether the rising generation shall be anything more than we have been or not. O woman, woman! Your example is powerful, your influence great. . . ." (55). In stark contrast to her September 1832 speech, Stewart ends with an exhortation about the powers of women, particularly black women. This is another example of Stewart's acute ability was to align her rhetoric with her audience.

#### Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall

Stewart has no introduction for the "Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall" given on February 27, 1833, but she does immediately unify her intended audience of black folk with the phrase, "African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color in the United States." The gender distinction refers to men because in this address Stewart makes a conscious choice to construct an audience of men.

Stewart reproaches her male audience for contributing to their wretched state. She suggests blacks are spurned not because of race, but because they let themselves "be considered as dastards, cowards, mean, faint hearted wretches." (57). She urges men to come forward in the strength of God to be useful and active in the community as she is "for they [whites] admire a noble and patriotic spirit in others; and should they not admire it in us?" (57). She laments that there are no men of the modern day who are speaking in defense of blacks. "Talk, without effort, is nothing; you are abundantly capable, gentlemen, of making yourselves men of distinction; and this gross neglect, on your part, causes my blood to boil within me" (58). She exclaims that if men had turned to "mental and moral improvement" she might have stayed at home (60).

Similar to her address to the African-American Female Intelligence Society of America, Stewart speaks intimately to her people. She directs this message to black males whose inactivity forced a woman to step up to the

podium and do the work that they should have been preparing themselves to do. Stewart uses every possible persuasion, including risking her justification to speak, to goad black men into action. These arguments would be incomplete, of course, without her reminder that blacks must critique each other in love.

The reason why our distinguished men have not made themselves more influential, is because they fear that the strong current of opposition through which they must pass would cause their downfall and prove their overthrow. And what gives rise to this opposition? Envy. And what has envy amounted to? Nothing. (62)

Central to every political argument Stewart has made thus far, internal division is a hindrance to emancipation because, as she concludes in the speech, commitment to "African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color in the United States."

#### Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston

"Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston," given on September 21, 1833, is her most aggressive speech. Addressed to a crowded mixed audience, Stewart speaks defiantly and defensively. She commences with the woman question: "What if I am a woman[?]" She mentions biblical heroines: Deborah, Esther, Mary Magdalene, and the Samaritan woman at the well. She asserts that the God of these women is her God, and that St. Paul would have changed his mind about women speaking in public if he knew of "our wrongs and deprivations" (68). Her second rhetorical query is also powerful. "Again; why the Almighty hath imparted unto me the power of speaking thus, I cannot tell" (68). With this line, she reminds her audience that she did not call herself; God called her.

Then to defend her right to speak, Stewart reaches beyond God's authority to secular texts. She challenges her audience to read up to page 51 in "Sketches of the Fair Sex," a text about women's influence throughout the ages around the world. She mentions fifteenth-century women martyrs; apostles, warriors, divines, and scholars (68-69). She also tells a story of a thirteenth-century woman of letters in Latin and law. By using these examples of learned women, Stewart defends herself as a learned woman. She uses herself as model to suggest that when her people become educated, they also will be competent enough to petition for their rights even in the face of opposition.

For I find it is no use for me as an individual to try to make myself useful among my color in this city. It was contempt for my moral and religious opinions in private that drove me thus before a public. Had experience more plainly shown me that it was the nature of man to crush his fellow, I should not have thought it so hard. Wherefore, my respected friends, let us no longer talk of prejudice, till prejudice becomes extinct at home. Let us no longer talk of opposition, till we cease to oppose our own. For while these evils exist, to talk is like giving breath to the air, and labor to the wind. (70-71)

Stewart points out that their rejection of her is a rejection of the efforts of their women, a rejection of their freedom, and a reminder of their self-indulgence, prejudice, and malice amongst each other.

Upon her official exit from the public arena, Stewart thanks her friends, urges the members of the church to keep struggling, and reminds the unconverted that hell is hot (72-73). "The bitterness of my soul has departed from those who endeavored to discourage and hinder me in my Christian progress; and I can now forgive my enemies, bless those who have hated me, and cheerfully pray for those who have despitefully used and persecuted me" (74). Concluding in this way, Stewart reminded her audiences that they were not just rejecting her, but they were rejecting God and very possibly an emancipated future. This final messianic message placed her audience in the declension stage of the jeremiad. The prophecy would remain unfulfilled as long as they rejected messages and messengers like her.

#### Conclusion

In order to understand fully the decisions that Stewart made and the risks that she took in disseminating her discourse, we must pay particular attention to her audiences. Benefiting from the invisible author and reader characteristics of the written word, Stewart unabashedly addressed multiple audiences at once. When in public, she contended with the fact that, as her farewell address implied, audiences often were hostile toward the embodiment of a black woman. Thus Stewart constantly made adjustments. Her 1832 address to a mixed audience offered a humbled image of herself. In her address to other black women, she asked for permission to be sincere and severe. She became more daring and perhaps more frustrated in her early 1833 direct chastisement of the men who would criticize her. For

the farewell speech, her sense of urgency was at its peak. She knew that she had to leave the lecture circuit in light of public reproach. She knew that she had to leave Boston altogether, and if anything were to be salvaged from her attempts, she would have to make explicit claims that her gender had nothing to do with the prophetic message she was bringing from God. It is this desperation that forced Stewart to make unambiguous claims about the right of a woman to speak in public. Without the exigence, she might have been content to skirt the issue with a reliance on domesticity and deliverance from the divine. This sense of urgency drove Stewart's career and the publication of her second edition of essays, speeches, and meditations in 1879. She made sure to leave her texts because she wanted her message, God's message, to reach as many audiences as possible.<sup>20</sup> And it has.

Stewart's contribution to black feminist discourse extends beyond the fact of her being the first black woman to address a promiscuous crowd. Her prescient commitment to publishing her work, including her speeches, left extant texts for audiences more diverse than Stewart ever could have imagined. Her expansion of the jeremiad to include races as well as genders models the inclusivity and coalition building that are the foundations of black feminist thought. Furthermore, her inclusion of multiple audiences demonstrates an awareness of the complexity of articulating a black political agenda.

Stewart was one of the earliest orators to understand that ameliorating the black condition demanded participation from multiple audiences. Her uncompromising message of self-help reiterated that there would be no freedom for blacks or whites until all Americans lived up to their divine calling as virtuous Americans. This inclusion of blacks and whites both male and female allowed her to project a rhetorical vision of parity under God that modeled the society in which she wanted to live.

#### Notes

1. Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), xiii. All further quotations from Richardson's edition of Stewart's essays will be noted in the text with page number references in parenthesis following the quotations.
2. Richardson's claim that Stewart was the first American-born woman to raise a political argument is disputable. Miss Priscilla Mason of Philadelphia presented a salutatory oration that justified (to a promiscuous audience) a

woman's right to speak in public. This epideictic oration may or may not be considered a political argument, but it is the earliest extant speech given by an American woman; it was published in 1794. Deborah Sampson Gannett was the second American-born woman to address a promiscuous crowd. Her lectures about posing as a man in the Revolutionary War were given in New England in 1802. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Gender and Genre: Loci of Invention and Continuation in the Earliest Speeches by U.S. Women," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 8 (1995): 479-95.

3. Throughout this essay I am purposefully using black and white as indeterminate racial signifiers. Although Stewart never refers to the sons and daughters of Africa as black, using the alternative term African American confounds the distinction she makes between the children of Africa and Americans (whites).

4. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 30-31.

5. David Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 7; Moses, *Black Messiahs*, 32.

6. Moses, *Black Messiahs*, 38.

7. Shirley Wilson Logan, *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 40.

8. Howard-Pitney, *Afro-American Jeremiad*, 15.

9. Peter P. Hinks, ed., *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), xiv.

10. *Ibid.*, 5.

11. *Ibid.*, 45.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, xxiii-xxiv.

14. *Ibid.*, xxiv.

15. My citations refer to the reprinted collection in Richardson. Richardson does not include the meditations originally published as a pamphlet by Garrison and Knapp in 1832. I am not concerned with the meditations in this paper because of their limited political content, but they can be found in their entirety, as well as the complete texts of her speeches from the original edition of *Productions from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*, in Henry Louis Gates, ed., *Spiritual Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

16. Logan, *We Are Coming*, 40.

17. Celeste M. Condit, "In Praise of Eloquent Diversity: Gender and Rhetoric as Public Persuasion," *Women's Studies in Communication* 20 (1997): 110-11.

18. Earlier, I quote "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality" where Stewart makes reference to black and white souls sharing the same blood and spirit, but only in this address does she explicitly refer to blacks as Americans.

19. Although "An Address Delivered Before The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America" appeared in the *Liberator* in April 1832, which would be before "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall" in September 1832,

Stewart reversed the order in *Productions*, and I present the lectures in the order she published them.

20. Upon receiving a pension from her late husband's service in the War of 1812, Stewart published *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*. The following preface reaffirms her commitment to spread the Word. "The author believes that God's time has come for the work to be recognized among His people; for God seeth not as man seeth, but uses such instruments as He sees proper to bring about His most wise and glorious purposes. That God's blessing may accompany this work, and that souls may be brought to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus, is the prayer of the unworthy author" (87).