

“Read[ing] Men and Nations”

*Women in the
Black Radical Tradition*

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Too often when we celebrate black radical historical traditions we evoke the same major thinkers and activists, such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Samori Marksman, and Jarvis Tyner. And though no thinking person would dispute the influential work of these men and their importance in shaping the historical trajectory, seldom do we include women in this established order. This can be frustrating for those of us who are aware of the lifelong activism and intellectual contributions of women like Sojourner Truth, Charlotta Bass, Queen Mother Moore, Frances Beal, and Charlene Mitchell.

The gender politics embedded in political movements helps to explain this state of affairs. That is, too often notions about what roles men and women ought to perform in the struggle are grounded in culturally situated ideas related to masculinity and femininity. These presumed polarities construct and position the progressive man as a patriarchal leader and thinker and the progressive woman as a helpmate and nurturer. To

demonstrate that black radical leadership goes beyond male bodies, I explore the contributions of two women, one from the nineteenth century, Sojourner Truth, and one from the twentieth, Charlotta A. Bass. Their leadership allows us to better understand what Hazel Carby points out: “Ideologies of masculinity [and, I would add, of femininity] always exist in a dialectical relation to other ideologies.”¹ Thus, the agency of women as political leaders and impressive thinkers is denied by not only the masculine flexing by some men but a host of other factors, including racism, class elitism, and antileftist politics.

Numerous writers have detailed how race, class, gender, sexual preference, and cultural constrictions coalesce to shape the experiences of black women, usually placing them at the edge of organizational and normative structures.² Nowhere is the marginal reality of a black radical subject more clearly demonstrated than in the life of Sojourner Truth. Even though the highly regarded Truth stood at the vortex of race, class, and gender

in the nineteenth century and is said to have passionately interrogated this space by asking the simple but weighty question "And ar'n't I a woman?" her voice was continually muffled. As Cheryl Harris, in her analysis of Truth, explained, any intervention by a black woman was—and, I would add, continues to be—"subject to be overlooked, misheard, misinterpreted, misrepresented and ultimately misappropriated."³ Thus, when we reflect on why many of our black heroines either have been only partially revealed to us or have fallen into the cracks of our historical memory, we should also think about how amazing it is that we know as many as we do, considering how difficult it was and still is for black women actually to become known or visible in this society. One has to marvel at how active those notable radical women were in managing to construct a public image that forced others to see them as progressive agents in the making of history.

In the case of Truth, she clearly took the initiative with her "tongue of fire." Enslaved from her birth in 1797, she was an illiterate person who responded to what she heard, witnessed, and experienced—all of the heart-wrenching pain attached to being black, female, and enslaved. The overall objectification and violent exploitation of black women's bodies as both sexual beings and laborers was a shameful occurrence during the nineteenth century, and Truth forcefully raised her voice against this multilayered oppression. She merged what was perceived by most to be separate movements—antislavery and women's rights—to fully affirm and defend herself, and by extension her sisters, against the damaging stereotypes used to justify enslavement.

According to Nell Painter, the "symbol" of Truth that best resonates today is linked to her famous speeches in Akron, Ohio (1851), and Silver Lake, Indiana (1858). In these settings Truth unleashed challenging questions

regarding slavery and the rights of women. In 1851, it is reported not only that she asked the poignant question, "And ar'n't I a woman?" thereby demanding respect from a society that deemed black women worthless, but she answered it in a way that forced her audience to recognize how her physical strength had been used to build this country: "I have ploughed, and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me!" All of this was done as she "bear de lash well!" At the same time, though, Truth made her audience understand the high price of her labor, and that of other black women, when she described how slavery had denied her the right to motherhood: "I have borne thirteen children, and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me!"⁴

The penetrating comments attributed to Truth are important not only because she was among the most quoted activists of the period, but because she isolated the core of issues that black radicals continue to struggle with and organize around. By detailing how she had worked, she raised the key question of who actually benefited from the surplus produced by the hands of enslaved African Americans. This remains an important question for us today, because clearly African Americans have no material gains from slavery, and most whites argue that since they have no money in their personal accounts from Mississippi cotton production, they in fact enjoy no tangible benefits either. Who controls the wealth, and thereby the power, in capitalist America? How is it obtained, by "de lash" or other exploitative techniques such as underemployment? How can it be redistributed to the producers? These questions are central to the black radical struggle. In addition, Truth's sad testimony regarding motherhood anticipated the current debates surrounding the rights of poor women to keep their children. Under President Clinton's ad-

ministration, welfare benefits have diminished even as foster care agencies—which are presumed to parent better than poor families—are pumped up with federal funds. Following Truth's lead, contemporary frontline radicals demonstrate against the elitist notion that would subject motherhood to a repulsive means test.

At her Silver Lake speech in 1858, Truth was confronted by hecklers who were bent on sapping her courage to plead the case of freedom for African Americans. They demanded that she prove she was physically a woman by baring her breast. Truth complied and in doing so turned the culprits on their head. Instead of being ashamed of her body and who she was, she assumed a confident posture and exposed her breast in public, and is recorded to have said she had "suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of [my] own."⁵ Remaining dignified under the most humiliating circumstances, Truth defied those who intended to vilify her. Here and elsewhere, she empowered herself and black womanhood by, as Harriet Mullen puts it, denying "social propriety its oppressive power to define, limit, or regulate" who she was, and dismissing "the conventions of femininity" that kept all women, in varying degrees, bound and silent.⁶

No doubt Truth constructed a persona to be reckoned with, but not all African Americans celebrated her quick wit and improvisatory oratorical style. At times her "cultured" colleagues were embarrassed by her spontaneity and refusal to clothe her sentiments in "proper" language. Moreover, she seldom presented her questions to speakers with the etiquette they deemed appropriate. For example, on one occasion Frederick Douglass wrote that Truth was a "strange compound of wit and wisdom, of wild enthusiasm, and flint-like common sense, who seemed to feel it her duty to trip me up in my speeches and ridicule my efforts to speak and act like a per-

son of cultivation and refinement."⁷ Often radicals, and more accurately organic intellectuals, are perceived as oddities and accused by their peers of troubling already progressive waters. But their presence helps to make sure that the waters remain ruffled and free from reactionary thinkers and dominating personalities. Truth was a radical in this tradition; she tended to think quickly on her feet and sometimes her style was off-putting, but she understood that black people had to stand firm in their convictions to challenge the nation to include them in its future.

Truth's presence helped shape the character of African-American history because she was a woman who was aware of her own power. By embracing her total self, she forced others to recognize that the essence of a black woman was not that of an androgynous slave. Her personal testimony demonstrated that a woman's femininity could be acknowledged in a way that did not make her unequal to a man. She inserted herself into the political discourse; it is reported that she said, "I don't read such small stuff as letters, I read men and nations."⁸ Truth gave black women a set of shoulders on which to stand, serving as a foundation for an African-American womanly radical voice.

If Truth represents the most visible nineteenth-century black radical woman, one of the most astonishing but veiled radicals of the twentieth century is Charlotta A. Spears Bass. As the publisher and managing editor of Los Angeles's oldest black weekly newspaper, the *California Eagle*, Bass exemplified activists who shed light on how acquiring literacy meant obtaining another political tool for African Americans. With the power of the pen, from 1912 to 1951, Bass wrote blistering editorials that galvanized black Angelenos to fight against Klan terrorism, restrictive housing covenants, employment discrimination, and school segregation. Furthermore, Bass was not simply an armchair revolutionary but



Charlotta Bass and the Eagle Staff.

Courtesy of Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

a politician and political organizer with a commitment to domestic reform and progressive foreign policies. At the 1952 Progressive Party Convention, Paul Robeson nominated her as the vice presidential candidate. After W.E.B. Du Bois gave the seconding speech, stating, "Mrs. Bass represents black America and American womanhood," she accepted the call, making her the first black woman to run for national office.¹⁰

To come of age during the most volatile years (1880–1930) of Jim Crow would have been difficult for any African American, but particularly for a Southerner. Lynchings of men, women, and children were estimated at 2,462 for the era.¹¹ Perhaps this explains why Bass left her hometown of Sumter, South

Carolina, around 1910 to go live with her eldest brother in Providence, Rhode Island.¹² She was twenty years old and fortunately found employment at a local newspaper, *The Providence Watchman*, working as an office clerk and advertising solicitor. The cold weather, however, soon took its toll on Bass's health, and she was forced to seek relief in a warmer climate. Bass moved West that same year for a recuperative stay in Los Angeles.¹³ After finding immediate employment collecting and soliciting subscriptions for the *Eagle*, Bass became a trusted employee of the editor and owner, John J. Neimore, who suffered from ill health. After his death in 1912, Bass became "owner, editor, and publisher of a defunct newspaper" with "financial assets

amounting to \$10.00 in cash and not more than \$150.00 in overdue bills."¹⁴ Bass persevered with assistance from her husband, Joseph, and soon the *Eagle* was soaring to new heights. By 1914 the paper had won the reputation of being a "people's paper" fighting on all fronts to win African Americans and other people of color full citizenship rights and protections.

The driving force behind the newspaper, Bass wanted her readership to know that their voices and votes were crucial to the struggle to acquire and maintain constitutional and civil rights. She instructed African Americans not to hand over their ballots to either the Republicans or the Democrats out of party allegiance, because neither gave the black masses any serious consideration. In a 1921 editorial she announced that the patriotic song, "My Country 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty" was a farce. "How long will Uncle Sam permit the Negro children to sing this National Anthem, when deep down in his soul there comes the refrain—But not for me; but not for me?" she asked¹⁵ In seeking a new political home, Bass urged black folks first to find out whether in its fold an individual could be accepted regardless of race, color, or class.

Such comments came at the tail end of World War I when African-American men were returning home. Because the fight for "democracy" abroad had not impacted the status and condition of black people in the United States, Bass aligned herself with the radicals of the day. She is one of the few recorded active members of both the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) and

the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) cofounded by Marcus Garvey.¹⁶ Ideological tensions regarding nationalism versus integration, along with class, elitism, and the vicious competition between the

leaders of the two organizations, Du Bois and Garvey, kept most people from joining both organizations simultaneously. Bass's joint membership evidences her refusal to become bogged down in divisive politics and destructive class distinctions. Using

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her editorial power to help control this heated rivalry, Bass published articles that described the UNIA's program of business, self-respect, and race pride and consciousness as a "blessing to all," whereas the NAACP's immediate program of civil rights was considered an admirable goal. Honored by both groups for her civic-mindedness, Bass identified with strong political leadership.¹⁷

Serving as the first lady president of the UNIA's Los Angeles Division, Bass traveled and spoke on behalf of the organization. It is through the record of her travels that one can observe the intensity of Bass's passion for justice and how she inspired others to fight discrimination. For example, in Wasco, California, a cotton-growing area populated by black people, Bass was described as a "lady next in greatness to Marcus Garvey." There she told her "brothers and sisters" that she believed that "every American should enjoy a decent life." Everyone should have "standard homes with running water and lights, and . . . you should have paved streets in your town. And you should get the wages for your labor

that would guarantee such things." Bass further pointed out that President Hoover had "chained" black people to the "land as industrial slaves," and moreover that what was happening in Wasco was "true of Negro people everywhere in this country, and in other parts of the world."¹⁸

Although there are many areas of struggle that black radicals disagree on, an adequate standard of living for workers has never been one; thus, Bass tapped into a powerful organizing issue that went beyond the UNIA and NAACP to include radicals on the "left." During the 1920s, Communist Party leaders like Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore, and Grace Campbell argued that militancy combined with an alliance with white workers was the most efficient way to dismantle discrimination and solve economic problems.¹⁹ Their organizing efforts proved difficult, however, because they had to go up against racist whites as they attempted to persuade African Americans that the party was a viable choice for the UNIA, NAACP, political clubs, and self-help societies. But by offering a critique of capitalism and colonialism, Bass used party rhetoric to mobilize discontented African-American workers to rebel against injustices. "Issues, rather than party labels, were the things to fight for," Bass wrote.²⁰

Throughout the years, Bass's leadership role expanded, as did her analysis of the world situation. During the 1930s, she published countless articles in support of the nine black defendants in the Scottsboro trials, and she was a West Coast leader of the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign. In addition, she was also one of the organizers of the Industrial Business Council, which encouraged black people to go into community-directed businesses. During World War II, Bass became more vocal about the interconnectedness between foreign policies and domestic affairs. Her membership in the Council of African Affairs (CAA), a hotbed of the

black left, no doubt further sensitized her to the importance of organized attacks against colonialism and imperialism. (Not only did she learn from the CAA bulletin about the voting patterns of U.S. and Soviet representatives at the United Nations regarding colonialism in Africa, but as Gerald Horne points out, the bulletin also reported the "antiwar views from the Nigerian *Eastern Mali*, the *Takoradi Times* of the Gold Coast, the African League in London and others."²¹) Calling for international peace and liberation, Bass said that she supported the "movement for freedom of all peoples everywhere—in Africa, in Asia, in the Middle East, and above all here in our own country. And we will not be silenced by the gun, the lynch mob, or the lynch judge."²² As CAA activists found themselves tagged "red" by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Bass concluded that in "labeling the responsible organizations and individuals Communist," the government had created "a cheap, easy and effective way of stopping or at least slowing up activity leading toward equality."²³

By 1948, after years of local community crusading, Bass became part of the national radical avant-garde when she served as a founding member of the Progressive Party (PP).²⁴ The PP grew out of a movement by New Deal liberals to put pressure on the Truman administration.²⁵ It was abundantly clear in the election year of 1948 that the Democratic and Republican parties had failed to advocate a strong civil rights program. Thousands of African-American civil rights leaders, artists, and trade unionists joined Bass's effort to mobilize this "third" party as a counterweight to consensus politics on the brink of the Cold War. Determined to place all of her energy into the election of the PP presidential candidate, former vice president Henry Wallace, Bass even used the *California Eagle* office to register voters.²⁶ As the West Coast driving force of the PP, Bass was



Charlotta Bass. Courtesy of Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

fully aware that Wallace was unlikely to be elected, but she, along with her peers, recognized that there was a crucial issue at stake. Would African Americans continue to give their votes to those who would do nothing to end racial discrimination? Truman saw the writing on the wall and knew he needed black votes for reelection; thus, the Democratic National Convention quickly made history by adopting its first civil rights plank and pledged to create a permanent Civil Rights Commission. Clearly, the PP helped to liberalize the political atmosphere during a period of conservatism, pushing the Democratic Party to grant some civil rights concessions to black people in order to garner their votes.

In 1952, at the age of sixty-two, Bass was primed to carry on this tradition of forcing mainstream parties to absorb progressive planks to earn African Americans' votes. Understanding her role, in her acceptance speech for the vice presidential candidacy for the PP, Bass expressed her "honor" and "responsibility" in being selected as a "pioneer" in the struggle for freedom and peace. The heart of her speech linked the fight for peace as "one and indivisible with the fight for Negro equality." Critical of the U.S. role in the oppression of people of color, she stated, "Yes, it is my government that supports the segregation by violence practiced by Malan in South Africa, sends guns to maintain a bloody French rule in IndoChina, gives money to help the Dutch repress Indonesia, props up Churchill's rule to the Middle East and over the colored peoples of Africa and Malaya."²⁷ But no conscious people take "terror lying down," she said, they fight back. "We will not be stopped by the reign of terror let loose against us and against all who speak for peace and freedom, and a share of the world's goods."²⁸ In terms of domestic issues, she declared the need for higher wages, new schools, new hospitals, and standardized homes.

Campaigning under the slogan "Let my people go!" Bass concentrated on how Cold War repression stymied Truman's support of civil rights. "They are spending all our money and resources in a war on Communism," Bass declared, and "not in a war on poverty and racism."²⁹ Gerald Gill correctly pointed out that Bass's analysis of how Cold War hysteria in Washington curtailed the civil rights movement has since been echoed by New Left and revisionist scholars and activists. Rallying voters under the phrase "Win or Lose—We Win," Bass encouraged her audience to understand that after the election African Americans would "fare better" because politicians would know that they require action and "not promises." Although the PP received less than one percent of the popular vote, Bass's candidacy marked a significant historical moment in the black radical tradition. A group of Harlem women expressed it best by saying, "Because of you [Bass] we can all hold our heads a little higher."³⁰

Charlotta Bass and Sojourner Truth were two activists who never concealed their agendas in elitist language or inaccessible jargon, because they wanted to mobilize masses of people to challenge discriminatory practices that kept people of African descent poor and disempowered. Being bold and brassy rather than silent in the face of adversity, they asked hard questions and articulated ideas that pushed the larger American society to evaluate itself when it showed no signs of wanting to. Their oratory and activism exposed the hypocrisy of American society and directly challenged imperialist notions of manifest destiny, survival of the fittest, unchecked capitalism, and the ludicrous assumptions of meritocracy. Their lives are testaments to the fact that it has never been easy being black, radical, and a woman; both women were criticized by African-American elites satisfied with mainstream crumbs and middle-class

privileges. But self-assured and full of down-home common sense, both Truth and Bass were energized and subsequently refueled by the communities they pledged to serve. As members of their communities and inheritors of their traditions, we should take care to remember them with the reverence that they deserve.

Notes

1. Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2.
2. Recently published historical texts on black women include Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998); and Deborah Gary White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).
3. Cheryl Harris, "Finding Sojourner's Truth: Race, Gender, and the Institution of Property," *Cardozo Law Review* 18, no. 2, November 1996, p. 317.
4. Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth, a Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 167. It is important to acknowledge that Painter details that everything that we know of Truth comes through the writings of other people, usually white women. In fact, much evidence suggests that Truth's "And ar'n't I a woman" speech was actually the invention of Frances Gage, a white radical feminist of the day who actually recorded the talk twelve years after Truth gave it. These historical facts, however, do not take away the essence of Truth as a prominent symbol of black womanhood and her commitment to political causes. Hine and Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope*, pp. 107-108.
5. Margaret Washington, ed., *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xxxii.
6. Harriet Mullen in Washington, *Narrative*, p. xxxii.
7. Washington, *Narrative*, pp. x-xi.
8. Erlene Stetson and Linda David, *Glorifying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 3.
9. Gerald R. Gill, "'Win or Lose—We Win': The 1952 Vice Presidential Campaign of Charlotta A. Bass," in Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds., *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1978), 112.
10. Jacqueline Leavitt, "Charlotta A. Bass, The California Eagle, and Black Settlement in Los Angeles" in June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf, eds., *Urban Planning—and the African American Community in the Shadows* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 167, 169; Gill, "'Win or Lose—We Win,'" p. 112.
11. Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynching 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 17.
12. Different sources suggest that Bass was born in 1874, 1879, 1880, or 1890 in either Sumter, South Carolina, or Little Compton, Rhode Island. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green, eds., *Notable American Women. Vol. 4: The Modern Period* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 61-63; Kristine A. Yohe, "Charlotta Bass" in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black Women* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), 61-62; The Charlotta A. Bass Collection at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, California.
13. Charlotta A. Bass, *Forty Years: Memoirs from the Pages of a Newspaper* (Los Angeles: Charlotta A. Bass, 1960), 27.
14. Bass, *Forty Years*, p. 30.
15. Charlotta Bass, "Should the Negro Seek New Political Affiliation?" *California Eagle*, October 22, 1921.
16. Emory Tolbert notes that evidence of overlapping membership in both the NAACP and UNIA is difficult to find. See Emory Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles: Ideology and Community in the American Garvey Movement* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro American studies, 1980), 92.
17. Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles*, p. 92.
18. Bass, *Forty Years*, p. 41.
19. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).
20. Bass, *Forty Years*, p. 41.
21. Gerald Home, *Black and Red: W.E.B. DuBois and the Afro American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 129, 186.
22. Bass, *Forty Years*, p. 146.
23. Bass, *Forty Years*, p. 138.
24. Gill, "'Win or Lose—We Win,'" p. 111.
25. Manning Marable, *W.E.B. DuBois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 173.
26. Bass, *Forty Years*, p. 142.
27. Bass, *Forty Years*, p. 145.
28. Bass, *Forty Years*, p. 146.
29. Gill, "'Win or Lose—We Win,'" p. 116.
30. Gill, "'Win or Lose—We Win,'" p. 118.