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## Maria W. Stewart, Ethnologist and Proto-Black Feminist

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### Abstract

Discussions about nineteenth-century African American ethnology tend to focus only on black male thinkers. In the nineteenth century, ethnology was the study of difference among humans and often used racist science to justify discrimination against blacks. Black woman thinker Maria W. Stewart (1803–1879) made important contributions to ethnology but remains understudied. I argue that Stewart is a black feminist ethnologist because she aligns herself with her black male interlocutors on the core points of ethnology. Yet Stewart adds a distinctly black feminist position to the conversation. By focusing on Stewart’s speech “An Address Delivered to the African Masonic Hall” (1833), I show that she concurs with her contemporaries that black people are inherently great because of their genealogical connection to Africa. Stewart also agrees that the inherent greatness of blacks establishes their claim to sociopolitical rights. I argue that Stewart’s call for racial unity makes her a proto-black feminist and is a unique feature of her contribution to African American ethnology. Stewart’s call demands that white people be held responsible for the harm that they have caused to blacks, which can be remedied by the races coming together on equal footing.

Maria W. Stewart, a nineteenth-century black woman thinker, pined for education and for recognition as an intellectual, but she was alienated from the very community that she hoped to reach. With few exceptions, scholarly references to Stewart are presented as vignettes, neatly tucked away in the context of larger conversations about other ante-bellum feminist thinkers. The books and essays that do exist about Stewart tend to explore the religious and hermeneutic aspects of her work.<sup>1</sup> In black studies literature, Stewart has been recognized as a black feminist and black nationalist. In the current scholarly milieu, Stewart remains on the periphery with respect to the lack of engagement with her as a *philosopher* on the topics of race, gender, and equality.

Given her arguments about the uplift of blacks, based on the idea that they have a rich history, Stewart’s philosophy holds much for one to consider today. At a time when antiblack racism is normalized and even justified on the basis of stereotypes,<sup>2</sup> reaching back into the history of black feminist thinkers who demonstrate the act of “talking back”<sup>3</sup> to racist ideologies provides a better context for understanding the

liberatory and collective approaches of the philosophies of organizations such as the Combahee River Collective and Black Lives Matter. These groups promote the idea that securing liberation for the minoritized is the best way to achieve liberation for all. One progenitor who is understudied is Stewart. As a founder of black feminist ideology, she combined her unique position and viewpoint as a black woman to challenge the racist ideologies of her day with the goal to achieve racial unity. In this essay, I argue that Stewart should be taken seriously as a philosopher and more specifically a black feminist ethnologist.

Stewart's ethnological perspective promotes the greatness of being black, and her black feminist perspective is aimed at working toward liberation. As an ethnologist, Stewart creates a powerful argument against the sociopolitical oppression of blacks based on the notion that the origin of black people proves that they are inherently great. Stewart, as do other black ethnologists, uses these counternarratives regarding origin as ammunition to offer philosophically sophisticated positions demanding the right to be treated as full citizens of the United States. Such a fight, however, took a masculine approach in that pushing for rights and for citizenship meant standing up for oneself in ways that were unavailable to women, such as occupying public office and having an advanced education. Stewart admonishes blacks for having neither (Stewart 1987a, 57–58). Thus, the vision of sociopolitical liberation for black people prioritized men and masculine traits for obtaining it. This does not mean that Stewart did not see women as playing a key role in liberation, nor that women's liberation was not important (see Stewart 1987b). I argue that Stewart holds a proto-black feminist position in the fight against racism insofar as she argues that it must be waged by all people. I use the term *proto* here because one feature of black feminism, arguably, is the focus on intersectionality. Given her less nuanced discussion about having multiple identities, as one would find in Anna Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth, it may be more appropriate to call her a proto-black feminist (Cooper 1995, 45; Truth 1995, 36).<sup>4</sup> Regardless, Stewart is still a founder of black feminist ideology because she argues that the responsibility of black liberation is on the entire community regardless of race. Stewart's position thereby exemplifies bell hooks's claim: "It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counterhegemony." hooks continues, "The formation of a liberatory feminist theory and praxis is a collective responsibility, one that must be shared" (hooks 1995, 282). Stewart promotes the idea that racial oppression must be fought by both races. By doing so she makes white people responsible for the harms that they have caused black people and offers a remedy to the problem by stating that white people must fully accept black people.

This article is divided into four sections. First, I provide a brief history of the concepts of ethnology as they relate to both black and white male thinkers. Next, I provide a biographical sketch of Maria Stewart and make a few remarks about the historical and intellectual context in which she was writing. In the third section, I offer a close reading of Stewart's speech "An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall,"<sup>5</sup> which exemplifies her ethnological perspective. In this speech, Stewart makes sociopolitical claims with the goal to promote the liberation of black people based on the ethnological perspective that black people are inherently great. Stewart's claim to a rich African legacy bolsters her emphasis on self-improvement for black people. In the fourth section, I discuss her black feminist perspective, which is found in her call for unity between white people and black people as the most effective means toward racial liberation.

### White and Black (Male) Ethnology

Black ethnology cannot be divorced from the materiality of racism. Black thinkers understood that their lived experience of racism was, at least in part, influenced by racist arguments rooted in science and narratives about the origin of the human species. Black ethnologists thus responded simultaneously to the emerging idea of scientific racism in the nineteenth century and to sociopolitical oppression.<sup>6</sup> At bottom, black ethnology had two interrelated features: First, it presented an imagined narrative and assertion about the origin of black people generally tied to Egypt and Ethiopia that set the precedent of greatness for black people everywhere. This approach led to discussions about a plan for how to achieve the liberation of black people. Second, given the belief that the world is ever-changing and in accordance with the promise God made to people of African descent in Psalm 68, black people will reclaim their rightful place of power in the world and white people will face the judgment and destruction of God because of their role in the sin of slavery.

These claims highlight the interrelatedness of theory and praxis. Black ethnologists understood that the oppression they faced in their lived experience reflected the racist ideology that sought to harm them. In this section, I define ethnology and present the features of black ethnology. Black ethnology is an example of how black people have actively used their own intellectual prowess to challenge scientific racist ideology, and it must be underscored that such thought is crucial to achieving sociopolitical liberation.

At least until the nineteenth century, “ethnology” was generally thought to refer to the process of making comparisons among the races regarding their appearance, character, and other identifying characteristics (Vermeulen 2006, 124).<sup>7</sup> Ethnology is derived from “ethnologia” and “ethnologie,” from the Greek roots “ethnos,” or people, and “logos,” meaning word or reason. Harriet Washington states that ethnologists “applied the classification and categorization methods of the natural sciences, called taxonomy, to the study of man” (Washington 2006, 33). Ethnology was a precursor to social and cultural anthropology but should be distinguished from ethnography, which includes fieldwork (Haller 1971, 710). In its time, ethnology was considered *science*, even though it lacked the scientific aspects that one would expect to see today. Because of its theoretical nature, ethnology easily accommodated philosophical, historical, and burgeoning scientific frameworks. Ethnology was thus malleable enough to be used in support of racist ideas and, in turn, racist and sexist sociopolitical oppression. White ethnologists of the nineteenth century often made crude generalizations about a culture whereby physiology and biology were conflated into a single teleological narrative that sought to make claims about a race’s purpose in history (711). In fact, Franz Boas argues that the focus on cultural history is the feature that makes American ethnology distinctive. Part of understanding cultural history comes from understanding history itself, and another aspect is understanding how society affects the development of the individual (Boas 1920, 314–16).

One example of an American ethnologist is former US president Thomas Jefferson. In fact, his thoughts about blacks remained in the minds of black ethnologists for some time, as I will show momentarily. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson argues for the gradual emancipation of black people but suggests that once black people are freed and educated at the expense of the government, they should be shipped to Africa (Jefferson 1785). Why does Jefferson believe this? He contends that white people are still prejudiced against black people, black people will remember the harms that white people have committed against them, and nature would have it that black people

and white people live separately. Most important, *nature* produces natural divisions that prevent white people and black people from living together. Barring extermination of one of the races (145), the races will not be able to live together aside from instances of racial intermixing (149).

Jefferson's views are rooted in racist ideology justified by biological claims with the intent to make racism permissible. Black thinkers had strong responses to Jefferson's position; Benjamin Banneker, for example, wrote to Jefferson in 1791. It is not clear whether Banneker wrote because he had read the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, but he raised the point that blacks are just as intelligent as whites. As proof, Banneker enclosed a copy of his almanac, which included articles about events from the year and featured Banneker's scientific notes and observations regarding the planets, among other things. In his letter, Banneker felt assured that Jefferson:

will readily embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and oppinions [sic] which so generally prevails with respect to us, and that your Sentiments are concurrent with mine, which are that one universal Father hath given being to us all, and that he hath not only made us all of one flesh, but that he hath also without partiality afforded us all the Same Sensations, and endued us all with the same faculties, and that however variable we may be in Society of religion, however diversified in Situation or colour, we are all of the Same family, and Stand in the Same relation to him. (Banneker 1791)

In the nineteenth century, Jefferson's views about blacks continued to ignite black ethnology. James W. C. Pennington excoriated Jefferson for his ignorance about black intelligence, "O that he had reflected for a moment that his opinions were destined to undergo a rigid scrutiny by an improved state of intellect, assisted by the rising power of an unbiased spirit of benevolence. Had he done this, he would, as a wise man, have modified that ill judged part of his work which relates to the colored people" (Pennington 1841, 52–53). Pennington's own view was that intellectual capacity, production, and improvement occurs for all people the same way (56–64). Jefferson should have realized that enslavement had a negative effect on blacks by, for example, barring them from equal educational opportunities. Enslavement caused the disparity in intelligence among blacks, creating "anomalies," which refers to those blacks who are in fact more intelligent by virtue of having been afforded better opportunities. Racist ethnological claims like Jefferson's spurred black ethnologists to assert their own ideas of black history in the effort to lay claim to their greatness.

Central to black antebellum ethnology was an understanding of the history and future of black people. Establishing a history, even if imagined, was necessary to set a precedent for black greatness. For black ethnologists, the notion of black greatness was often two-pronged. On the one hand, it refers to the fact that black people are inherently superior to white people morally, spiritually, and intellectually, among other positive qualities. Black greatness also refers to the social and political claim that black people deserve to be treated as equal citizens. This claim to equality on the one hand, and superiority on the other, has led scholars such as Mia Bay to point out the contradiction between the effort to establish equality based on the idea of racial superiority. Bay writes: "African-American writers emphasized in defense of their race's color and condition: they were different but equal. Yet these black-authored arguments for difference and equality were beset by some of the same difficulties contained in the late nineteenth-century white segregationist doctrine of 'separate but

equal.' Equality does not easily coexist with difference or separation" (Bay 2000, 36). I argue, however, that overstating the capacities of black people was theoretically necessary to overcome the narratives that they saw as preventing their progress in the socio-political sphere. It was necessary to overstate the positive qualities of black people to make the case for why black people needed to be treated equally. Stewart also appeals to the idea of racial superiority, but as I will show, she does not see the same degree of contradiction between equality and superiority in her work. Stewart refers to the idea of racial superiority as a counterargument to the notion that black people lack a history and the corresponding qualities that are critical to racial progress.

One factor that most likely had an impact on the superiority view was the uniqueness that black people saw in themselves, which was undoubtedly influenced by the single most important source that they used to construct black history: the Bible. The claim that "[p]rinces shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God" (Psalm 68:31, *KJV*) was often evoked in black antebellum writings. Enslaved black people took this scriptural claim as a reference to the covenant that God had made with them. The story of the Israelites' liberation from the clutches of the Egyptians became a part of the enslaved people's "mythic past," implicitly prophesying that they, too, would one day be free. Enslaved black people saw themselves as kindred spirits to the Israelites, whose story helped them build their own history and served as a point of comparison for the lived experience of enslavement (Raboteau 1978, 311–12). In claiming this historical narrative as their own, black people participated in what Wilson J. Moses calls "vindicationist history," which enabled black people to promote a more accurate sense of their own identity (Moses 1998, 23). Some of the earliest written claims to this history include the works of Prince Hall and Richard Allen in the 1790s (Hall 1792; Allen 1833). There were two views of Egypt that figured in black people's purview: Egypt as the dark land where the Israelites were enslaved and Egypt as the black land of civilization (Trafton 2004, 225). Thus, making the connection to Africa and a grand *black Africa* was crucial for black antebellum writers who hoped to show that they were connected racially, biologically, genealogically, and historically to greatness. To create one's history may seem to be risky, but white people's historical narratives regarding African-descended people (and Europeans) were, of course, fabricated too. Racist ideas never emerge from actual evidence; rather, they are the product of a society's desire to create a world in which black subordination is necessary, as Ibram Kendi argues (Kendi 2016, 9). Thus, the earliest black ethnologists, including some of the enslaved, created a distinctly black, grand biblical and historical narrative to talk back to a white imaginary that sought to disparage them.

Returning to Jefferson, one can see that racist thought and practice are connected in his claims. which underscores why antebellum black thinkers not only sought to reconstruct racist ideology, but also understood that racist practice was connected to such thoughts about their innate capabilities. One area in which this can be seen most clearly in the nineteenth century is in harmful medical science and medical practice against blacks. For example, phrenology, or the measuring of skulls, began in the 1820s and continued through the 1830s. Skull size was thought to suggest the intellectual capacity of races. By the 1940s, phrenology had become a widely disputed science, but the idea that one could justify the inferiority of certain races based on surmised inherent differences remained a part of racially biased science for the rest of the century (Glaude 2000, 129). The second half of the nineteenth century saw the burgeoning American concept of race supported by science. In the late 1830s, racist ideologies from physicians such as Josiah Nott were used to medically justify racism by suggesting that black people had

physical features such as knee joints that enabled them to bend better in servitude. Nott and other ethnologists sought to support their views that black people were of a different origin from white people using the concept of polygenesis (Washington 2006, 34–37). Black women, of course, physically bore the brunt of the racist and scientific ideologies that were thought to justify their oppression. Physicians such as the “father of gynecology,” J. Marian Sims, conducted numerous experiments on enslaved black women in and around Mobile, Alabama, without their consent. Some of these women died or lived the rest of their lives with humiliating gynecological issues (Snorton 2017; Cooper Owens 2018).

Black ethnologists also responded with their own thoughts about the science of blackness. One such thinker was ethnologist Martin R. Delany, whose work as a traveler to West Africa, physician, and ethnologist meant that he could draw from a breadth of knowledge in his writing on race. Published in the postbellum era, Delany’s *Principia of Ethnology* is an exemplar of a black ethnology text (Delany 1880). In this book, Delany makes biological and philosophical claims establishing the superiority of the black race. The chapters in the book are guided by three concerns: the origin of races, civilization, and the institution of letters. Delany’s central objective is to show the superiority of the black race, which can be seen in the grandeur of black people’s civilization and intellect. Delany, who studied to be a physician, was familiar with the *rete mucosum*, the intermediate part of the body thought to hold the limpid fluid responsible for differences in skin color (Bell and Godman 1827, 287–88). The *rete mucosum* is a colorless, cellular sponge-like structure that is in the intermediate part of the body between the cuticle, which is the part that is visible to the eye, and the skin, or the *cutis vera*, which covers the organs in the internal system. The cuticle, *rete mucosum*, and *cutis vera* are all white or transparent substances. The limpid fluid, once it fills the *rete mucosum*, produces the skin color that can be seen through the cuticle (Delany 1880, 26). Delany has monogenist leanings, arguing that all people on the earth are essentially unified, having come from a single pair (9–10). The idea that the human species is unified has biological support. Delany argues that for all races, the limpid fluid that fills the *rete mucosum* is the same color, red; it is the different concentrations of the fluid among races that create the difference in skin color. For blacks, the limpid fluid is highly concentrated, whereas it is somewhat lighter for the yellow and white races (26–27). For Delany, the differences in the concentration of the limpid fluid offer support for the general narrative about human civilization and the superiority of the black race, which he derives from the Bible. In the biblical narrative, Noah’s sons are thought to be of three different colors. Ham was black, Shem was yellow, and Japheth, white. According to Delany, the differences in skin color among the men indicate the power that each race would come to have. Delany states:

For the convenience of classification, these complexions may be termed *positive*, *medium*, and *negative*. Ham was positive, Shem medium, and Japheth negative. And here it may be remarked as a curious fact, that in order of these degrees of complexion which indicated the ardor and temperament of races they represented, so was the progress of civilization propagated and carried forward by them. (29)

Delany’s central point is that the superiority of a race can be proven by the advancements that the race’s civilization and culture have made. Interestingly, Delany’s reliance on the Bible does not include either a commentary on or retelling of what is known as the curse of Ham, a Biblical story that has often been interpreted as a justification for

the enslavement of black people (Genesis 9; Goldenberg 2003). Regardless, it is clear that Delany does not believe that Ham and his descendants were cursed. In fact, Delany notes that Ham's descendants who migrated to Egypt and Ethiopia subsequently came to form the first civilized, learned societies in the world. Delany justified the superiority of black people by relying on biology and philosophy; he could then more easily assert that with the help of God, black people will become "regenerated" despite their current social and political status (Delany 1880, 109).

Black ethnologists' feeling of superiority was deeply influenced by their fervent belief in Christianity. They saw its philosophy as helpful in justifying their desire for education and moral improvement. Their argument is that the downfall of Africa was due to sin and polytheism (Pennington 1841, 32). Therefore, the rebuilding of the black race occurs through the moral improvement of the race. Yet they were critical of the Christianity of the white imagination. White people were not true Christians because of their racism. Black people were true Christians because of their forbearance and in fact had the power to convert white people because of their superior practice of Christianity (87–89). An aspect of their superiority is taken to be innate, however. David Walker states:

I know that the blacks, take them half enlightened and ignorant, are more humane and merciful than the most enlightened and refined European that can be found in all the earth. Let no one say that I assert this because I am prejudiced on the side of my colour, and against the whites or Europeans. For what I write, I do it candidly, for my God and the good of both parties: Natural observations have taught me these things. . . . (Walker 1995, 24)

This idea of superiority conjoined with the reliance on the biblical narrative and extended to their jeremiad style of writing. An exemplar of this style was Walker, Stewart's friend and muse. Psalm 68 was understood to be a contract that God had made with the children of Africa, and black ethnologists took seriously the belief that they would one day rise again as a race despite their current status as second-class free citizens and enslaved people throughout the world. The context of the verse is a prophecy that promises destruction for those who do not follow the commandments of God. For black ethnologists, their kinship with the Israelites enabled them to paint white people as the Egyptians who would be severely punished if they did not change their racist ways. For some antebellum black ethnologists, the fulfillment of this prophecy meant taking an active role in antislavery activism. Black antebellum ethnologists thought that fighting for liberation was the best way to ensure their freedom. For some thinkers, however, this initiative was considered incendiary and came at too high a cost. Walker argued that because their lives are threatened every day, black people have the right to revolt against white people, even if it means killing them. He writes, "they want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition—therefore, if there is an *attempt* made by us, kill or be killed" (Walker 1995, 25). Walker is advocating self-protection, a right that anyone should have if they also have a body. However, it was not acceptable for blacks to use violence even though white men have always been violent, often unprovoked. Walker's *Appeal* was swiftly banned throughout the south, where black people were still enslaved, for fear that the book would incite insurrections (Sean Wilentz in Walker 1995, vii). A bounty was later placed on Walker's head, and his friends encouraged him to leave Boston for Canada, a suggestion that he refused. In 1830, Walker was

found dead in his home. Although some sources suggest that Walker died from tuberculosis, other historians have speculated that he was murdered (xix).

### Maria Stewart, A Biographical Sketch

Stewart, born Maria Miller, was born in 1803, free, in Connecticut. At the age of five, she was orphaned and went to live with a white minister and his family. There, she was introduced to Christianity and began to desire knowledge through formal education (Stewart 1879, iv). However, Stewart would never acquire the education that she so craved and would lament this for the rest of her life. Instead, she would educate herself and share what she knew with others as much as she could. At age twenty-three, while living in Boston, she met and married her husband, James W. Stewart, a War of 1812 veteran who died three years after they were married. He and Stewart never had children, and she was left alone and destitute. The brief biography by her friend, Louise C. Hatton, states that although Stewart's husband had bequeathed money to her, she was unable to claim it because the will had been stolen by the executors of his estate two days before he died (8).

It was after her husband's death in 1830 that Stewart experienced a spiritual awakening, and in 1831, she made a "public profession of my faith in Christ" (iv). That same year, Stewart began a public speaking career that came to a quick halt in 1833, prompting her departure from Boston. Given Boston's rich history of abolitionist thought and activism, one can safely assume that leaving was not easy for Stewart. Boston was home to the most important abolitionists of the time, including Walker and William Lloyd Garrison, who also happened to be Stewart's friend. The city was also home to a growing middle class of black Bostonians who were invested in principles of uplift, as reflected in the variety of institutions they founded, such as the African Masonic Lodge. Leaving Boston meant the end of Stewart's public speaking career, but it also meant leaving a community of abolitionist writers and thinkers. Regardless, Stewart's exodus seems to have been necessary. Historians disagree about why she left, but the evidence that Stewart gives suggests that she was shunned (Richardson, 1987, 70). Joycelyn Moody states that Stewart was aware of the "persecutions she endured on the platform because of her gender" (Moody 2001, 44). Marilyn Richardson writes that Stewart's activism through public speeches challenged the narratives around black women's status in society, making it likely that Stewart was a pariah in her community. Black women were supposed to adopt unobjectionable positions in both the home and the community, and Stewart's status as a single, childless woman and public speaker fell far outside the purview of these expectations (Richardson 1987, 24–26). Moreover, Stewart was speaking publicly to "promiscuous" audiences—that is, audiences of mixed race and gender—regarding race, gender equality, and social and political rights for black people. Stewart's farewell speech suggests that when she left Boston, she did so angrily and reluctantly.

After leaving Boston, Stewart retreated from the public eye for nearly fifty years. During this time, she went to live in New York and later in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., working as a teacher (Stewart 1879, 9). Later in life, Stewart reconnected with dear supporters and friends in Boston, including Garrison, who, before his death, helped her publish a compilation of her works entitled *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*, which includes reprints of her four public speeches, a reprint of a pamphlet in which she reflects on her life, and a new collection of meditations and prayers. This book had been "suppressed" for many years, but Stewart felt that now,



as a woman in the later stages of her life, God had allowed her to share this book (Preface). Her finances also improved. With the generous help of her friend, Louise C. Hatton, Stewart, nearly fifty years after the fact, learned of the estate that her husband had left to her and out of which she had been swindled. She was able to claim a government pension given to widows of those who had served in the War of 1812. About nine months after the publication of *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*, on December 17, 1879, Stewart died, fifty years to the day of her husband's passing (Preface).

### Stewart's Ethnological Address

Discussions about black ethnology remain an all-boys club (Bay 2000, 41), but this does not mean that black women thinkers failed to respond to the important ideas of their day. Indeed, black women did respond, even if they did so in ways different from those of their male counterparts. In this section, I describe Stewart's philosophy as an example of ethnology, thus expanding the scholarly conversation around her work. In *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*, Britt Rusert acknowledges that Stewart was an ethnologist but does not engage her work (Rusert 2017, 72). Rusert does not say why Stewart does not receive further attention in the book, but Rusert's remark that Stewart did not write a lengthy treatise on ethnology might offer an explanation.

Like her male interlocutors, Stewart refers to Egypt as the example and precedent for black greatness as the first feature of her ethnological speech:

History informs us that we sprung from one of the most learned nations of the whole earth; from the seat, if not the parent of science; yes, poor despised Africa was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations, was esteemed the school for learning, and the most illustrious men in Greece flocked thither for instruction. (Stewart 1987a, 58)

Stewart, like her black male interlocutors, refers to the notion of black greatness as a counterargument for the claim that black people lacked a history rich with its own statesmen and intellectuals. Stewart portrays ancient Africa as the "parent of science" and the home of wise men, legislators, philosophers, and world-renowned educators, a legacy that Stewart suggests could be seen in the contemporary moment if black people would choose to live moral lives. Stewart attributes the "sin and prodigality" of the black race, in contrast to its former, ancient greatness, to its current subordinate state. However, she asserts that "Ethiopia shall again stretch forth her hands unto God" from Psalm 68 as a way of harkening back to the mercy and promise God has shown to black people. Stewart's understanding of history is active, moral, and dynamic: black people can be proud of the legacy that they have inherited, but they must also take an active role in shaping their future as a community. For Stewart, recognizing the great historical legacy of black people is posited as a goal and not as an actualized accomplishment. The value of this argument is twofold. First, Stewart can tie black people to a legacy that is empowering to them; second, because Egypt is posited as an ideal, black people become internally motivated to pursue something better for themselves and their community. It is this internal motivation that leads Stewart to make the two sociopolitical claims that follow.

The second feature of Stewart's ethnology is the emphasis on self-improvement for blacks. This point exemplifies the relationship between theory and praxis in that the

history of greatness justifies the need for sociopolitical improvement. For Stewart, the push for self-improvement can be accomplished in a multifaceted way that includes education, respectability, and institution-building. Most important, Stewart sees self-improvement as the responsibility of blacks themselves. One example of self-improvement is formal education. Marked by her own lack of education, Stewart believed that it was an important personal and communal component of achieving uplift. Stewart's friend and intellectual mentor David Walker commented on the need for black people to be able to explain themselves in ways that would empower them to challenge white people. In the *Appeal*, Walker complains about the ignorance that a proud father of a black son shows. The father had spent significant money on his son's education, boasting that the boy was able to "write as well as any white man"; for Walker, however, this investment was meaningless. The boy had good penmanship but did not have the knowledge or capacity to write down his own thoughts, and Walker told the father that his son was thus ignorant. Walker writes, "[F]or coloured people to acquire learning in this country makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation." True knowledge was the necessary ammunition for black people in their fight for civil rights; only this knowledge would help them to understand what white people were thinking (Walker 1995, 31).

Like Walker, Stewart emphasized the need for education because "knowledge is power" (Stewart 1987a, 57). Stewart believed that knowledge would open doors for black people by bolstering their confidence in the face of white people. It would also lead to the full integration of black people in society, thereby making them respectable (59–60). Stewart argued that black people's education would make it such that white America would no longer be able to deprive black people of their inherent rights (61). Stewart's desire for respectability is tied to the degree of initiative that black ethnologists saw as necessary to ensure their own uplift. They saw the promise of Ethiopia as both God's covenant with them and His promise to judge whites, but they did not interpret the scripture as an excuse to avoid working to their own benefit. For Stewart, people should take it upon themselves to get as educated as they can despite the circumstances. One concern that arises here, however, is Stewart's use of the term *respectability*.

*Respectability politics* was coined by Evelyn Higginbotham to describe a political ideal in which black women subvert their political views by engaging in socially acceptable actions. The respectability of black women, which appears as "ladylike" behavior, gives the women access to spaces that they can then attempt to change. In the nineteenth century, respectability gave black women the ammunition they needed in order to effectively challenge stereotypes that they saw as obstacles to their cause (Higginbotham 1994, 191). Black women used respectability to show the falsehood of the stereotypes that were used against them to justify their oppression. Despite its use, a major criticism of respectability politics is that it is inherently classist, elitist, and reliant on notions of black pathology. Stewart is also guilty of this. Stewart admonishes blacks for engaging in "frivolous activities" such as gambling and spending too much time at the dance hall, saying that they do so to the point at which the activities become "absolutely disgusting." Stewart makes equally problematic claims that black people cannot expect God to listen to them if they do not change their sinful ways. Stewart effectively blames black people for their oppression as though there is an inherent reason for their condition (Peterson 1995, 58). Stewart also relates respectability to the ideals and practices of white people. When encouraging black people to invest in building institutions of learning that would support their communities, she says, "We

ought to follow the example of the white people in this respect. Nothing would raise our respectability, add to our peace and happiness, and reflect so much honor upon us, as to be ourselves the promoters of temperance, and the supporters, as far as we are able, of useful and scientific knowledge” (Stewart 1987a, 60). Stewart’s point here is that to be in close proximity to white people, both in practice and ideals, is crucial to having the same opportunities they do when it comes to uplifting the race. Regarding the concerns about class, Higginbotham observes that black women of the lower class could in fact be respectable, too; to be respectable was about one’s behaviors and preferences, or social capital, rather than the amount of money to which one had access (Higginbotham 1994, 192). Carla Peterson argues that “to critique this ideology of racial uplift as bourgeois or conservative is to misunderstand the dynamics of social change under conditions of internal (or external) colonization” (Peterson 1995, 12). It is necessary to understand that in a time period when African Americans lacked access to key institutions, the desire to be like white people was more about having the same opportunities for self-improvement. With respect to gaining an education, for blacks it was more about demonstrating the sense of inward dignity that they held about themselves than desiring the white gaze. That is, blacks can want something for themselves that whites had without also wanting the approval of white people. Brittney Cooper notes: “Racial purity and formal recognition by white bodies of power were not prerequisites for the concession and acknowledgement of Black dignity. Black women could show up, move through the world, and make profound contributions when violent and oppressive conditions ceased to inhibit their access to full bodily integrity” (Cooper 2017, 6).

Regardless, Stewart does not get a pass for utilizing the argument for respectability politics as a way to motivate blacks to action. The damage of such ideas can still be felt today in the black community, creating divisions within it over differences in class, preferences, bodily comportment, and speech. I do not have the space to devote to these concerns, but it is noteworthy to consider the consequences of respectability politics despite its usefulness in the nineteenth century. I rather want to highlight the fact that respectability politics is an example of how black women understood that they were embodied, that they were oppressed due to their race and gender. For Stewart, insofar as all people are defined by their “genius and talents,” black people should use their talents if they want to become fully free. The main point of Stewart’s claim, which is what I have sought to highlight in this essay, is her pragmatic approach to the uplift of black people. Stewart acknowledges that the world in which she lives is one where people are judged by their accomplishments. Thus, black people must be motivated to improve themselves so that they, too, can become accomplished. Stewart sees the main goal of respectability as making it possible for black people to become equal contributors to the wider society through a mild form of assimilation.

### Stewart’s Black Feminism

Like other black antebellum ethnologists, Stewart relies on the Biblical promise that God will punish white people if they do not change how they interact with black people. In her jeremiad, so-called because of the prophet Jeremiah who warned the Israelites that only destruction would come to them if they did not change their ways, Stewart argues that white people will face destruction if they do not change. The remainder of Psalm 68 from which the promise of Ethiopia is taken is important to consider in this context; it is a prophecy that those who do not love God and fail to treat well those who do love God will be destroyed. For Stewart, this scripture means that God has made a covenant

with black people to protect them and will thus judge white people if they harm black people. Stewart argues:

But many powerful sons and daughters of Africa will shortly arise, who will put down vice and immorality among us, and declare by Him that sitteth upon the throne that they will have their rights; and if refused, I am afraid that they will spread horror and devastation around. I believe that the oppression of injured Africa has come up before the majesty of Heaven; and when our cries shall have reached the ears of the Most High, it will be a tremendous day for the people of this land; for strong is the hand of the Lord God Almighty. (Stewart 1987a, 63)

There is hope for white people and for America if they, too, take up the mantle of responsibility by sharing their resources and institutions with black people. To do this effectively takes work, but if it is not done, society will never change for the better. This line of argumentation sets Stewart apart from thinkers such as Walker, who calls for the killing of white people if necessary. The difference between Walker's and Stewart's approaches to concerns about whiteness (besides the potential for bloodshed) is that Stewart calls for unity between the races rather than separation. She realizes that white people have full control of the institutions of higher learning, economic resources, and more. Therefore, it is necessary that black and white people learn to work together for the uplift of black people. Stewart writes, "Cast your eyes about, look as far as you can see; all, all is owned by the lordly white."

More important, however, Stewart is aware of the insidious ways in which structural racism works against black people, and she calls on white people to take responsibility for the harms that they have done to black people. White people have taken advantage of the labors of black people and thus owe it to them to do their part in ensuring their uplift:

Like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans gained themselves a name, like the names of the great men that are in the earth, while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support. We have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them. (59)

In Stewart's view, for the uplift of black people to take place, the races must act in harmony; this requires white people to let go of their power and share their institutional resources. To this end, Stewart criticizes organizations such as the American Colonization Society (ACS), noting that the idea of shipping freed black people to Africa shows that America is "blind to its own interests," given that black people could serve as soldiers in times of war, for example. Founded around 1817, the ACS, whose members included figures such as US senator and secretary of state Henry Clay and the composer of the "Star-Spangled Banner," Francis Scott Key, argued that expatriating black people living in America to Liberia would be better for them and for the country. The ACS's philosophy had missionary zeal, casting expatriated black people as useful in the conversion of native Africans to Christianity (Garrison 1832). Masked by what appeared to be benign intentions, one of the core goals of the ACS was to protect the institution of slavery. By removing free black people from the United States and transplanting them to Africa, the colonializationists were also

removing what they saw to be the largest threat to maintaining slavery (Frederickson 1971, 8–9). It was feared that free black people would incite revolutions. Thus, the ACS's arguments for the gradual abolition of slavery did not come from a place of empathy for the enslaved or a sense of morality; rather, they came from a desire to protect white interests (11). Of course, philosophies such as those espoused by the ACS were not the only views about colonization. Black people such as Prince Hall had been supporting the idea of expatriating blacks to Haiti or to Africa. In contrast to groups such as the ACS, however, black thinkers saw leaving America as an act to reclaim their dignity, whereas white colonializationists used expatriation as a reason to not extend equal citizenship rights to blacks. For example, in an essay rebuking the ACS, Frederick Douglass argues that blacks "believe that our people should be let alone, and given a fair chance to work out their own destiny where they are" (Douglass 1996, 140). Therefore, Stewart is similar to her male interlocutors in criticizing the ACS for taking the easy way out by refusing to help address issues in the black community that they, as white people, had caused (Frederickson 1971, 61). Stewart argues that instead of investing money in sending black people away, white people should invest in black communities, thereby helping black people to become useful members of society. Black people are oppressed because of the things that white people have done (63–64). Stewart ends her black feminist ethnological message with a call for racial harmony:

Let me entreat my white brethren to awake and save our sons from dissipation and our daughters from ruin. Lend the hand of assistance to feeble merit; plead the cause of virtue among our sable race; so shall our curses upon you be turned to blessings; and though you should endeavor to drive us from these shores, still we cling to you the more firmly; nor will we attempt to rise above you; we will presume to be called your equals only. (Stewart 1987a, 63)

Her message calls for black and white people, albeit for different reasons, to take shared responsibility for the uplift of black people. Stewart breaks from the ethnological tradition of black men and invites white people to become a crucial part of the uplift of black people. She thus intercedes for white people with God, so that God might change from punishing to blessing them if they work to uplift black people. To this end, Stewart asks God to protect both white people and black people as they work together toward racial harmony.

### Say Her Name

Stewart's marginalized status in her community and in the larger intellectual milieu did not stop her from making a very important contribution in her day, which was to call for unity between the races. Her position foregrounds today's antiracist work, thereby setting the example that continues in the fight for the liberation for marginalized voices. Black women thinkers are leading the charge. Alicia Garza, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, identifies the Combahee River Collective Statement as one inspiration for the black feminist perspective taken in her organization (Garza 2017, 147). Black Lives Matter and the Combahee River Collective, albeit a generation apart, focus on the uplift of marginalized voices, thereby taking a critical position in their time. Despite the founders of both groups being marginalized themselves because of their identities as black, female, and queer, the fact that they still lend their voices toward the unification of the human race is derived from the same kind of black feminist politics as Stewart's.

Stewart distilled empowerment from the internal resources of resilience, faith, pride, and determination that was already to be found in black people. This internal look is crucial to thinking about the ways in which Stewart saw black people as having the wherewithal to fight against racism. The fact that Stewart could notice and boldly lay claim to these resources makes her an important contributor to nineteenth-century black social and political philosophy. However, more work must be done in philosophy to uncover her unique perspective and the ways in which she challenged dominant race-based narratives in her time. When thinking about the narratives of race in the nineteenth century, aside from figures such as Anna Julia Cooper, mostly black male philosophers are mentioned. Among those names are DuBois, Crummell, and Douglass. However, not only did black women engage in activism that should also be understood as philosophy in action—such as the club movements, for example—black women did write and think about race as well. Maria W. Stewart was one of them.

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## Notes

- 1 For examples of work on Maria W. Stewart regarding her contributions to hermeneutics and religion, see, for example, Waters and Conaway 2007; Cooper 2011. Two texts that consider her contributions to intellectual history are Carter 2013 and Waters 2013.
- 2 For example, Darren Wilson, who fatally shot Michael Brown in 2014, called Brown an “it,” stating that Brown looked as if he were a “demon” and that upon touching Brown he “felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan” (Sanburn 2014).
- 3 Black antebellum thinkers were bold in making the case for why slavery should end and why they should have the rights to full citizenship. bell hooks captures the power of their arguments in the term *talking back*. She writes: “The act of ‘back talk’ and ‘talking back’ meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure.” hooks continues, “To speak when one was not spoken to was a courageous act—an act of risk and daring” (hooks 1989, 5).
- 4 I argue that Stewart is different from other thinkers such as Cooper and Truth who point out black women’s identity as black *and* woman. Stewart does not use this language but still contributes to black feminist thought insofar as she pushes for the unity of humanity in the fight against racism.
- 5 Reprinted in multiple places, the essay can be accessed in at least these three: Stewart 1879; Stewart 1987a; Moses 1996.
- 6 Some of the writings that I have mentioned that fall under the rubric of ethnology have also been categorized as pan-Africanist or black nationalist, which may be because of their sociopolitical emphases. See Moses 1996, which contains writings by Stewart, Jefferson, and Walker, among others.
- 7 I want to emphasize that I am using the term *ethnology* as it is defined in its earliest form and into the nineteenth century.

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