

boasts of being the freeest [sic] in the world; this on the very soil where the Revolution of 1776 began; in sight of the battle-field, where thousands of brave men fought and died in opposing British tyranny, which was nothing compared with the American oppression of to-day. In looking over my diary, I perceive that I did not mention that there was on the Friday night after the man's arrest, an attempt made to rescue him, but although it failed, on account of there not being men enough engaged in it, all honor should be given to those who bravely made the attempt. I can write no more. A cloud seems hanging over me, over all our persecuted race, which nothing can dispel.



## ESSAY OVERVIEW

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Free black women and men devoted themselves to the anti-slavery cause from the earliest years of the nineteenth century. Their writings, speeches, and protests served to educate and inspire white abolitionists, who have traditionally been the focal point in histories of the abolitionist movement. Historian Martha Jones reveals the ways in which free black women, some of whom had been enslaved, strove to make the struggle for women's rights as important as the fight against slavery. They challenged both the sexism that denied black and white women's equality and the racism that branded black people as inferior and often relied on racist and sexist stereotypes to diminish black women's abilities.

What were the main arguments against African American women's involvement in the antislavery movement? How did women respond to their opponents? How did black abolitionists educate and motivate their white allies?

### **“Right Is of No Sex”: Reframing the Debate through the Rights of Women**

MARTHA S. JONES

Of the many resolutions adopted during the September 1848 National Convention of Colored Freedmen, none was more novel than that which called for women's “equal” participation in the proceedings. During three days of deliberations in Cleveland, Ohio, delegates considered a dizzying array of issues, including the upcoming presidential election, armed opposition to slavery, the defense of fugitives, temperance, patronage of the black press, and the dignity of labor. Late in the final day, Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany petitioned for women to be “speaking and voting as men did.” When met with defeat in committee, an undeterred Delany brought the issue before the full assembly. An animated exchange ensued as men on both sides of the resolution spoke out.

Douglass then called upon a woman, Rebecca Sanford, to make the case for "the rights of woman." Sanford, a white woman and Quaker from Ann Arbor, Michigan, began by endorsing the convention's objectives: "God speed you in your efforts ... stop not; shirk not; look not back, till you have justly secured an unqualified citizenship of the United States." She continued, advocating for the rights to which she believed women aspired: "True, we ask for the Elective Franchise; for right of property in the marriage covenant, whether earned or bequeathed. True, we pray to co-operate in making the laws we obey." In a closing attempt to garner sympathy for her position, Sanford set forth a complex claim: "There are duties around us, and we weep at our inability." This formulation mobilized domesticity's tearful womanhood in service of the rights-bearing and duty-bound female activist.

Sanford's speech appears to have had the desired effect. In its wake, the only remaining objection was hardly that. Ohio representatives Charles Langston and William Howard Day argued that the Douglass-Delany proposal was redundant. The convention had already passed a resolution making "all colored persons present, delegates to this Convention." As "they considered women persons," the two reasoned, they saw no need for further measures—women were already full members of the convention. With this, the delegates endorsed a final resolution that read, "We fully believe in the equality of the sexes, therefore, Resolved, That we hereby invite females hereafter to take part in our deliberations." The minutes report that this outcome was met with an outburst. "Three cheers for woman's rights" rang from the convention floor.

Such a seemingly out of place episode in antebellum African American history has long given historians pause. Female influence was giving way to women's rights in black activist circles, a shift that opened a door to a rethinking of the gendered character of fraternal orders, churches, and political organizations. Key in this moment was a new understanding about the underpinnings of inequality. Prejudice grounded in sex was no less arbitrary than that grounded in color, activists argued, with both African Americans and women subject to "despotic acts of legislation and false judicature," as Martin Delany put it.

Nearly all black activists were confronting the woman question. In churches, despite elaborate efforts to keep women silent, cross-gender alliances put the licensing of female preachers on the agenda. At Ohio's Oberlin College, black students learned lessons in women's capacities and their claims as rights-bearing individuals. In antislavery circles, many men forged longstanding working relationships with women who increasingly held leadership positions and contributed to the success of abolitionism. These alliances brought African American activists to the earliest women's conventions in Seneca Falls and Rochester, where black women were likely spectators and black men provided support and leadership. By the fall of 1848, these influences were coming together to define the contours of a movement for women's rights among African Americans. In fraternal orders, women took the podium, claiming authority over their long-standing fund-raising work. In doing so they provoked proscriptive admonitions aimed at resisting any claims the women might make for rights. In church conferences, women called upon those men with a demonstrated commitment to women's rights to press

forward on claims for women's religious authority. In black antislavery circles, quiet experiments in female leadership were given a new name, as activists came to understand them in women's rights terms.

Through this lens, the Cleveland convention of 1848 looks typical rather than novel. Yet still unclear was the point of view of black women during Cleveland's national convention; not one was recorded as among the participants. How were black women thinking about their rights in 1848? One answer lies in the proceedings of subsequent conventions, where some black women insisted upon participating in the same manner as did men. Other women moved forward in more modest fashion, founding female associations through which they claimed a sort of public authority that also preserved their respectability.

**From Female Influence to the Rights of Women** As the 1840s began, female influence was giving way to women's rights. Still, many commentators continued to frame their views about women's public endeavors in terms of female influence. Such ideas likely had a familiar, if not clichéd, ring. Domesticity and respectability were the well-worn tenets of ideological prescriptions that celebrated the home as woman's most exalted sphere and morality as her most powerful of tools. What had been a modest push at the boundaries of these precepts in the 1830s became a more deliberate refiguring in the 1840s. A defensive insistence on what women should *not* be and do emerged along with demands that women take responsibility for the collective well-being of African Americans. Female influence was increasingly set in opposition to ideas about women's equality. Was prejudice based upon sex analogous to that grounded in race, and should women's rights stand alongside claims for civil rights and against slavery? activists asked. By the late-1840s, some answered yes.

The female influence that dominated in the 1830s had not disappeared. Many activists continued to advocate this familiar idea. In the mind of Buffalo, New York's James Whitfield, this rubric took on an especially pointed tone when he set out precisely what women ought *not* to do. Whitfield addressed a local Sunday School Benevolent Society and "rejoiced" to see women foremost in supporting the work of benevolence. Such work had clear parameters, Whitfield explained, with women barred from "the turmoil of politics ... the car of state ... the intricate mazes of diplomacy ... the rostrum and ... the ensanguined field" of war. Women, Whitfield urged his listeners, had made crucial contributions to the community's well-being. They must, however, accept that positions of authority and leadership were the exclusive province of men.

Some commentators distorted female influence nearly beyond recognition. If women bore responsibility for their communities' well-being, some posited, female influence might include women's activism in political circles. The commentary of Boston's William Nell, a Garrisonian activist and founding member of the Adelpic Union literary society, reflected this transformation. When he initially commented upon women's antislavery work, Nell deemed it within their "appropriate sphere." His thinking was shaped, in part, by a speech on the "influence of women" delivered to the Adelpic Union by Wendell Phillips.

Phillips had insisted on a distinct sphere for women, but it was an ambitious one: "When unrestrained by foreign dictation [to women was] to be attributed the success of every enterprise.... Impose upon her no restrictions—clip not the wings of her lofty aspiration for liberty. But let her do for her country and the world what seemeth to her good." Phillips did not exempt women from respectability and domesticity, however, expecting that they would also bring to bear their superior moral sensibilities, "regenerating public sentiment by ... sewing circles and fairs." Nell initially concurred with Phillips, telling readers of the *Liberator* that women must be given "something to do" and with no "restrictions" imposed, an ideal that would unleash the full power of female influence. But by 1848, Nell no longer subscribed to this view. Addressing a women's anti-slavery bazaar at Rochester, New York's Minerva Hall, Nell critiqued domesticity and advocated that women be released from "petty cares and groveling pursuits." The domesticity that had been central to the rhetoric of female influence was losing sway.

A new rhetoric of women's rights surfaced. As female influence lost coherence, this new set of ideas better explained the full range of expectations for black women, both in their homes and in public culture. This required a conceptual leap. Black activists began suggesting that the arbitrariness of prejudice grounded in race was similar to that grounded in sex.

Perhaps race and sex prejudice were analogous, if not interrelated, ideas. Such was the view of Martin Delany. In early 1848, just six months after joining the ranks of national antislavery lecturers, Delany embarked upon a "Western tour," during which he traveled between Pittsburgh, Columbus, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Detroit, stopping in many smaller towns along the way. Delany's purpose was to solicit subscribers to the *North Star*, and he penned regular missives to Frederick Douglass back in Rochester. Both African Americans and women were, Delany explained, "generally oppressed and deprived of their rights by the despotic acts of legislation and false judicature." Furthermore, women's autonomy and that of African Americans generally were mutually constitutive. As Delany expressed a desire to see black antislavery efforts become more self-supporting, women were critical to this objective. He called upon them to form "Anti-Slavery Societies, for the assistance of newspapers and competent lecturers among us." Delany placed the burden of enhancing African American independence upon women's shoulders. He urged that they follow the example of white female antislavery activists who "by their industry and perseverance, hold Fairs annually by which their newspapers and faithful lecturers are sustained." Black women's public work was similarly essential and, Delany remarked, "were it not for these efforts on the part of the ladies and societies, the Anti-Slavery papers ... would have long since ceased to exist." Delany called for black women's deeper engagement in politics.

Frederick Douglass marked this shift through the motto emblazoned on the masthead of his newspaper, the *North Star*. "Right is of no sex, truth is of no color, God is the Father of us all—and all we are brethren," was the credo that greeted Douglass's readers. Most of his biographers explain this position as a logical outgrowth of Douglass's associations with female antislavery activists. Such

women were highly committed advocates, organizing, fund-raising, and publishing. They risked bodily well-being and respectability by appearing alongside men on the speaker's circuit.

Douglass not only advocated the rights of women in 1848, he increasingly did so to an African American audience. The publication of the *North Star* marked an independent turn in Douglass's political evolution, and his overall effectiveness would require the cultivation of both black and white readers. The decision to publish his own newspaper was also a break from Douglass's position as protégé to William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass took a self-conscious turn toward African American public culture. The prospect of publishing a newspaper coalesced in Douglass's mind during an 1846–47 speaking tour of the British Isles during which he quietly amassed nearly \$2,500, largely collected by British female antislavery activists.

Douglass was setting the terms of his own politics. What were Douglass's expectations as he composed his provocative agenda? Certainly he believed this stance would secure a readership from among his white Garrisonian allies who shared a commitment to women's rights as well as antislavery. In this Douglass was correct. However, as the itinerary of Martin Delany's western tour suggests, Douglass was anxious to attract a black readership as well. Less certain was how African Americans would respond to his assertion of parity between the rights of women and those of slaves and of black people. Would African American public culture follow the *North Star's* lead?

**Black Public Culture without Regard to Color or Sex** The framing of the woman question in terms of rights reflected more than the radical ideas of a few men; Douglass and Delany were hardly alone in 1848. Black activists generally were striving for new common ground. They sought to expand their circles and bridge the divide between the East and the West. In print culture, as well as the realms of politics, religion, and education, the growth of communities and institutions was coupled with a self-conscious effort to establish a distinctly African American presence. A key dimension of this process was consideration of the woman question.

In churches, women's rights ideas collided with notions of female influence. Religious activists in Methodist churches debated whether women should be silent helpmeets or spiritual leaders.

Ideas about women promised to reshape church structure and law. As black Methodist denominations moved into their second full decade of independence, church leaders began to scrutinize internal policies and practices. Among Methodists, the establishment of missionary societies, the support of common schools, and the creation of publishing houses occupied deliberations. These ambitions gave rise to questions about the sources and nature of religious leadership. What sorts of individuals were best suited for the ministry in an age of complex institutions and multifaceted agendas? Some promoted an educated ministry, eschewing those who came out of a local, self-taught tradition, preferring men with formal, often college or seminary training. Women's religious leadership surfaced within this discussion as well. The early struggles of preaching women

like Jarena Lee and Julia Foote took on institutional significance as Methodists debated whether women should be granted licenses to preach.

Women's claims were situated in their work on behalf of the church. They had long raised an indispensable portion of denominational budgets, though this dependence upon women's work did not lead to a critical reconsideration of their authority. Instead, male church leaders generally labored to maintain a distinction between female support and male leadership through carefully orchestrated proceedings. For example, at the 1843 New York Annual Conference of the AME Zion Church, only when "regular proceedings" were "suspended" by the presiding officer did women enter the conference chamber. The United Daughters of Conference, represented by their officers, were "introduced" to the body, and they entered in procession "under the direction of their [male] Guardian." They were invited to sit "a few moments" and granted leave to "present their liberal and generous donation of fifty dollars." This interlude concluded with the women "treated" to "a short address, calculated to encourage them in their laudable enterprises." Male church leaders regulated women in the conference chamber. The public and authoritative nature of their fundraising work was rendered invisible, and women's voices remained silenced.

Oberlin College was where some activists learned their first lessons about the rights of women. In that Ohio school, the presence of African American students fueled antislavery debates while the presence of young women stimulated women's rights agitation. Since its founding in 1833, Oberlin had been coeducational, admitting women and men. In 1835, through a set of negotiations generated by the admission of a group of radical antislavery defectors from Cincinnati's Lane Seminary, the trustees resolved to admit African Americans as well. Oberlin immediately became notorious for its radical mixing of the sexes and the races, but the school's climate was a moderate one. Black students never exceeded 5 percent of the student body in the pre-Civil War years, and most were enrolled in the preparatory department. The presence of young women did not amount to an institutional endorsement of radical views on the rights of women.

At Oberlin, a new generation of African American activists (young men—Oberlin would not admit its first black female students until the 1850s) was receiving its own education about the woman question. Enrolled in courses of study from the preparatory to the collegiate, Oberlin's black students came from cities and towns including New York, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., Louisville, and Cincinnati, the latter supplying a full one-third of the school's black students. Many brought with them a commitment to Garrisonian antislavery ideals, which by the 1840s included women's rights. This perspective conflicted with that of the school's leadership, which promoted the view that women were suited to work through a distinct sphere and barred them from speaking before promiscuous audiences.

Oberlin's female students were powerful instructors on the woman question. Some openly challenged respectable strictures, generating a lively debate within the Oberlin community. Most controversial, perhaps, was Lucy Stone, one of the few women enrolled in the collegiate course in the 1840s. Stone organized

a clandestine women's debating society and ultimately boycotted commencement exercises, refusing to have her graduation speech delivered by a male faculty member. Her refusal to conform to the school's model of respectable womanhood forced all members of the Oberlin community to refine their views about the standing of women in public life, particularly in politics and the church.

Across the nation, African American activists embraced Oberlin in all its complexity. There was, in their view, little to criticize. They appeared at ease with even the most radical implications of the school's integrated environment, lauding its egalitarian underpinnings and implicitly embracing the complexities that a cross-race and cross-gender student body generated. By the late 1840s, Oberlin's black students were entering public culture; leading political organizations, churches, and schools; and bringing with them the complex sensibilities that time spent at Oberlin developed in its students.

Alongside the Oberlin example, abolitionist activism remained a key setting in which ideas about the woman question were refined.

Men, including Frederick Douglass, William Nell, Charles Remond, and William Wells Brown, confronted women's rights as they worked within organizations such as the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society (wnyass). That society included women as full and equal members, and by 1847, wnyass women raised funds, served on the executive committee, corresponded with antislavery papers, and traveled as delegates to national meetings. Black male antislavery activists served as delegates alongside women in wnyass conventions.

These alliances explain how black men came to appear at the earliest women's rights conventions in 1848. Antislavery work has long been identified by historians as among the routes that antebellum-era women took to rights activism. The identities and political acumen that some women forged through antislavery work led them to resituate their interests in explicitly gendered terms and to manifest their political identities through outlets that were female dominated, both ideologically and administratively. In 1848, antislavery women were among those who convened a meeting expressly for the consideration of women's rights. Their call for a convention at Seneca Falls proposed a discussion of the "social, civil and religious rights of women." The first day's proceedings were open to women exclusively, with the "public generally" invited to attend on the second day.

An asymmetry between male and female black activists was evident. No African American women took part in the formal proceedings at Seneca Falls, though historians suggest that black women were likely among the meeting's spectators. The role played by one black man, however, enjoys near-legendary status. Frederick Douglass has long been venerated for being Elizabeth Cady Stanton's sole ally as she put forth a demand that the franchise be extended to women. Douglass not only supported Stanton's proposal; he committed to taking the floor and advocating for the measure. Strengthened by Douglass's alliance, Stanton persevered. And true to his word, Douglass brought his finely honed oratorical powers to bear on the assembled delegates, proclaiming, "The only true basis of rights, was the capacity of individuals." Douglass exemplified

the ultraist position on women's rights, expressing the view that he "dared not claim a right which he would not concede to women." Maintaining that women should be "elevated to an equal position with man in every relation of life," he told those gathered at Seneca Falls that "it need not be questioned whether she would use that right [to vote] or not," rather, "man should not withhold it from her." This was the only resolution that did not pass unanimously, but the demand for women's right to the elective franchise was included in the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments. The alliance between Stanton and Douglass has been lauded as a high point in antebellum political culture.

This veneration of Douglass has obscured a full view of the woman question within black public culture in 1848. Douglass's gesture was neither exceptional nor a surprise. He was not the sole black male activist to take part in the early women's conventions. For example, two months later, at Rochester in August 1848, Douglass was joined by Jermain Loguen and William Nell. Loguen was a fugitive from Tennessee who settled in western New York during the late 1830s, attending the Oneida Institute and serving as an AME Zion minister and delegate to state and national black conventions. Loguen was appointed one of the convention's vice presidents and took the podium to speak in support of the women's objectives. William Nell also addressed the gathering, praising the "energies and rare devotion of women in every good cause" while arguing that women were equal to men, such "that he should never cease to award the grateful homage of his heart for their zeal, in behalf of the oppressed class with which he stood identified." These men arrived at the early women's conventions well-versed in the woman question. Since the late 1820s, African American activists had been grappling with questions about women's public authority highlighted by the Seneca Falls convention.

**1848 and the Woman Question in African American Public Culture** It would have been difficult to avoid a discussion of women's rights for a black activist in 1848. By late summer the question assumed a fine point: what were the implications of women's rights for African American public culture? A momentum was building, one that pressed for a reordering of power and authority in fraternal orders, churches, and political organizations. A deliberate and self-conscious network of activists pressed for the expansion of women's public standing, and a women's movement among African Americans was under way. Within some African American churches, discussion of the rights of women to preaching licenses took center stage, pressing the limits of female authority in the religious realm. In fraternal orders, perhaps the most exclusively male institutions, women were joining forces to share in the social capital generated in such spaces. In political conventions, the issue of women's rights was placed on the agenda, and women became members of these deliberative bodies. The women's rights issue took hold in black public culture. But such rights were measured by the standing of African American women relative to their black male counterparts rather than by abstract ideals or the rights claims of white women such as those set forth at Seneca Falls. Though these efforts secured

only modest gains, by the close of 1848 African American activists could not deny the rights of women to be a key question confronting public culture.

Some campaigns were rhetorical. Activists aggressively recast longstanding questions in distinctly women's rights terms. Such was the case in August 1848 when Frederick Douglass pointedly criticized the contradictions embodied in the practices of benevolent societies and churches. Such organizations, Douglass chided, heralded women as essential supporters of institutional life while denying them standing as members and leaders. This challenge was inspired by Cincinnati's United Colored American Association (ucaa), which Douglass singled out for praise when its female members took a prominent role in a public program. Fraternal orders were not public culture's sole offenders, and Douglass's critique was sweeping: "It is only necessary to give woman an equal opportunity, and she will prove herself an equal to man in all things. Why do the Sons of Temperance, Odd Fellows, masons, and other secret societies, solicit woman's aid in the furtherance of their objects, and yet deny them the privileges of their institutions?" In urgent tones, Douglass promised that the *North Star* would do its "duty ... by reminding others of the importance of doing that which is right."

Here was the woman question aimed at the heart of private, all-male fraternal orders. Such settings may seem like unlikely places in which to wage a campaign for women's rights. But Douglass knew that the Masons, for example, were popular and highly respected sites of associational life. It was true that most secret societies had no formal place for women. Still, fraternal orders relied heavily upon women's fund-raising and moral support to erect lodge halls and sponsor food drives, burial funds, cemeteries, and widows' pensions.

For readers of the *North Star* who were encountering such female activists, Douglass explained their presence at the podium and the pulpit in the broadest woman question terms. He called upon his readers to ponder the place of women within public culture. Why were women as a group denied the opportunity to exercise authority within churches, political conventions, and fraternal orders? Douglass's challenge captured the tension between the enormity of women's responsibilities and the constraints on their institutional standing.

Tensions within black Methodist churches were far more overt as women's rights ideas generated reconsideration of churchwomen's authority. At the year's AME Church General Conference, female activists who conducted fund-raising as the Daughters of Zion resurrected Rev. Nathan Ward's proposal of four years earlier, again advocating the licensing of women to preach. They confronted an imposing gathering of men from fourteen states, including 175 ministers and 375 male lay leaders. They competed with an ambitious "official agenda" that included the election of a second bishop and a discussion of the structure of the church missionary society, the establishment of a book depository, a plan for common schools, and sanctions for divorce and remarriage. To overcome their exclusion from the formal proceedings, the female activists turned to a male ally, J.J. Gould Bias of Philadelphia, who agreed to sponsor their petition. Bias had been part of experiments in women's political leadership not only as a Garrisonian antislavery activist but also as a member of the American Moral Reform Society (AMRS), where he served in 1839 as a delegate alongside his wife, Eliza, and numerous other women.

To put down such a resolution required powerful rhetoric in 1848. The task of defeating the Daughters of Zion proposal was given over to Daniel Payne, a Baltimore-based minister, later the denomination's senior bishop, who deployed a complex construction of black womanhood to defeat the Daughters of Zion. Payne began by urging the church to tailor its laws to tenets of respectability and domesticity. The licensing of female preachers was "calculated to break up the sacred relations which women bear to their husbands and children," leading to the "utter neglect of their household duties and obligations," he warned.

Antislavery circles were being similarly shaped by women's rights in 1848. There, these ideas bore fruit and expanded the way for female activists to assume authority alongside their male counterparts. Such was the case during the meeting of a Philadelphia-based African American antislavery society during October 1848. Called to generate support for the *North Star*, in substance this meeting centered around the charge that three of the city's African American churches were "pro-slavery," barring abolitionist lecturers from their pulpits, preaching only tepid anti-slavery ideas, and affiliating with denominations that failed to exclude slaveholders. This provocative accusation generated a set of heated exchanges between activists on the local and national level. Yet, as the controversy swirled through public meetings and the press, little attention went to the meeting's other provocative dimension: women served alongside men on the society's governing bodies.

Words were followed by deeds. As the Philadelphia meeting got under way, statements regarding the equal standing of men and women were followed by the seating of female officers. Charles Remond set the meeting's tone by couching the first resolution, one that called for a committee on the roll, in the suggestion that no "impediment" should prevent "any gentleman or lady who may desire to address the meeting" from doing so. With this, the proceedings were open to women, both black and white.

While quietly carried out, these innovations were nonetheless remarkable. Lucretia Mott was among the women in attendance and was well known to the black women delegates as their long-standing ally in the work of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Mott conveyed her enthusiasm for the gender-inclusive character of the convention in a letter to Elizabeth Cady Stanton: "We are now in the midst of a Convention of the Colored people ... all taking an active part—and as they include women—& white women too, I can do no less ... than be present & take a little part." For Mott, who reported traveling to the meeting place despite the pouring rain, the significance of the meeting was the ambitious vision of its black activist leaders, one that embraced "the cause of the slave, as well as of women."

**"Three Cheers for Women's Rights": The Cleveland National Convention of 1848** The 1848 cheer for women's rights at Cleveland now appears in its full context. Those who gathered for that national convention reflected debates already animating the fraternal orders, churches, and antislavery societies to which the delegates also belonged. The convention movement was once again at the center of black political culture.

Oberlin College veterans shaped the debate. Charles Langston and William Howard Day were the two Ohio delegates who reminded the convention that

women were "persons too" and thus equal participants in the conference's deliberations. Langston had attended Oberlin intermittently from the mid-1830s through 1843, and Day had graduated in 1847. Langston and Day, who as African Americans were necessarily at the center of the school's most provocative innovations, absorbed a sophisticated range of thought on women's rights.

Some delegates had just come from the summer's women's conventions in Seneca Falls and Rochester. There was Frederick Douglass, who had played a key role at Seneca Falls. In Cleveland, Douglass contributed the wording of the women's rights resolution. Through his authority as president, he ceded the floor to a white woman, Rebecca Sanford. Sanford had recently attended the western New York women's conventions, and she set forth the issues most salient to the nascent women's movement. The right to vote and to marital property and a role in "making the laws" were her objectives, Sanford explained. Remarkably, however, she failed to address the matter that most immediately confronted the convention. Was the right of African American women to take part in such a gathering among those Sanford sought? Her silence on the point speaks volumes about the complex political terrain that black women were required to negotiate. On the one hand, Sanford's presence buoyed their claims for authority in the convention by reminding conference attendees that their deliberations were of interest to those active in allied social movements. However, black women's particular objectives might be overlooked if others spoke for them. Indeed, Douglass's choice of Sanford as the sole female speaker left black women's points of view indiscernible.

What of African American women? They were only the subjects of resolutions and the targets of sentiments of sisterhood. Although they were present during the proceedings, the meanings they associated with the debate remain a matter of speculation. Some insight into their views, however, may be gained from the following year's meeting of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio. There, black female activists overtly claimed political rights. Their strategy was to ally themselves with the chair of that meeting's business committee, William Howard Day. Day presented a resolution authored by a woman known only by her name, Jane P. Merritt, that placed the issue of women's standing squarely before the state's African American leadership. Merritt's resolution challenged women's exclusion from political authority: "Whereas the ladies have been invited to attend the Convention, and have been deprived of a voice, which the ladies deem wrong and shameful." The women threatened to walk out of the proceedings, warning, "We will attend no more after tonight, unless the privilege is granted." Delegates who had been present at the national convention just four months earlier were already familiar with the arguments. John Watson, who had stood in favor of women's rights at Cleveland, spoke for the majority when he advocated a resolution "inviting the ladies to participate." The women finally prevailed, gaining admittance to the convention through their self-styled activism that included male allies. Ohio's African American women transformed their standing in the community's political life.

The presence of black women at Cincinnati was not only a matter of form. They shaped the convention's deliberations. Seated as delegates, Ohio's women had the opportunity to weigh in on the convention's debates about female education, challenging their exclusion from female academics and seminaries.

Only from a public culture vantage point can the ascendancy of women's rights ideas be seen. By examining the diverse sites of African American associational life in a single frame, the connections between the decade's many conferences and conventions come into view. The bridges between fraternal orders, churches, and political organizations were built by activists whose lives were rarely limited to any one institution. Men and women moved from denominational conference to antislavery meeting and from college campus to fraternal celebration. By 1848, they were being regularly called upon to take up the woman question. Their sometimes warring words reveal how questions about women in public life were shaping institutions and knitting them together. In debating the merit of female influence versus women's rights, and then deciding upon what the latter might mean, activists gave public culture its meaning.

While refining their own identities and strategies as public women, these black female activists also educated the men in their midst. Their lessons were not those of white antislavery women but of African American women who were carefully navigating the terrain of rights while holding on to respectability, which they understood to be critical to their broader responsibilities.

Some of black public culture's most seasoned female activists turned their efforts toward female associations. In January 1849, for example, Sarah Mapps Douglass and her friends formed the Women's Association of Philadelphia. Philadelphia's black women activists expressed their public autonomy not by joining a women's rights movement but by founding their own gender-specific and race-based organization, electing their own officers and organizing antislavery fairs to support the *North Star* while collaborating with men like Delany.

After 1848, it was impossible to understand anything about black women's activism outside the frame of women's rights. Their exclusion from leadership positions, which would continue, could no longer be naturalized by the notion of a woman's sphere.

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