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Roberson: Maria Stewart and the Rhetoric of Mobility

Maria Stewart and the Rhetoric of Mobility

By Susan Roberson

Introduction:

Against the pervasive racism of the nineteenth century that claimed all African American women as enslaved or potentially enslaved and a patriarchy within the African American community that sought to restrain women's voice and mobility, a number of women nonetheless dared to test spatial and ideological boundaries. As geographer Doreen Massey argues, "the limitations of women's mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been . . . a crucial means of subordination" (11) and constructing what Rosi Braidotti calls "nomadic cartographies" provided some African American women ways of resisting the boundaries constructed by patriarchy and asserting new powers, discourses, and identities. Called and authorized by a higher voice to spread God's word, to encourage social improvement to Boston's black community, and to expose the wrongs of slavery, Maria Stewart defied social and spatial constraints to take her message to public audiences, enacting in her movement to the public arena the issues of freedom and civil rights that informed her discourses. Born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1803, orphaned by age five, and widowed in 1829, Stewart, a largely self-educated domestic worker in Boston, became the first American woman to speak before an audience of both men and women. Influenced by her conversion to Christianity in 1830, by David Walker's impassioned Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829), as well as her own "spirit of independence," Stewart spoke out against the discrimination and prejudice, sexism and slavery practiced in a country defined as "the land of freedom."¹

While no one would call the Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart (1835) travel writing, it does signal her movement to the male domain of the podium, announces her exile from Boston in 1833, and urges the social, religious, and political mobility of her African American audience. Moreover, it is full of the language of movement and spatiality and suggests the connections between mobility and knowledge, power, and freedom. In the introductory essay to the volume, for instance, she encourages her readers:

Oh, then, turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power. And God is able to fill you with wisdom and understanding, and to dispel your fears. Arm yourselves with the weapons of prayer. Put your trust in the living God. Persevere strictly in the paths of virtue. Let nothing be lacking on your part; and, in God's own time, and his time is certainly the best, he will surely deliver you with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm. (21)

Like Michel Foucault, Maria Stewart understands that knowledge and power are implicated with each other. When she repeats the aphorism, "Knowledge is power," Stewart understands what Foucault describes as "the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power" (69). She understands that knowledge and power are embedded in space, that social processes involve the dynamics of spatial control, and that the contestation over space is a political activity. She also understands what Foucault and other theorists of imperial control do not seem to recognize, the spatiality of spirituality and conversion as a political process. As her narrative and those of other African American women of her time demonstrate, space and mobility are complicated with a range of human

achievements. Knowledge is a spatial achievement when the halls of learning are opened to all people; power is a spatial achievement when women ascend the pulpit or podium; and freedom is a spatial achievement when it frees one to move about, to cut the bonds that keep one in place, in a number of ways—economically, socially, legally. And as Foucault recognizes, geographic metaphors, in what I am calling a rhetoric of mobility, are ciphers for strategies for transforming relations of power and knowledge. He says, “Endeavouring . . . to decipher discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power” (70).

The rhetoric of mobility articulated in Stewart’s *Productions*, itself a “practiced place” to use Michel de Certeau’s term (117), follows vertical and horizontal vectors of direction and movement—of being raised up and of progressing forward. These dual axes direct spiritual and political interrogations and mobilities, and derive from and are authorized by a shared matrix, spiritual conversion, which joins and unifies the two axes, the sacred with the secular. When Stewart speaks of “spiritual interrogations,” she joins the call from God to her active and vocal engagement in racial and gender equality. When she does so, she converts political concerns of equality to spiritual matters, converts historical events to the cosmic scale, and makes of equality and freedom, self-improvement and social uplift, spiritual interventions in the secular world. Here she says: “Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation—‘Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?’ And my heart made this reply—‘If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!’” (51). She becomes, in Carla Peterson’s words, a “doer of the word,” acting out physically the message of her discourses.

Formulating a black feminist rhetoric, a counter-narrative that joins rather than separates the church with politics, Stewart calls on the nation to live up to its spiritual ideals and African Americans to mobilize as a community of Christians, as she enacts in her own going forward the conjunction between spiritual and spatial journeying, the crossing of spatial and ideological limits of race and gender. Countering experiences of exclusion, marginality, and stasis, Stewart constructs a rhetoric of mobility that becomes practiced and that itself becomes a location of resistance. Patricia Hill Collins says, “The struggle of Black feminist thought for self-definition and self-determination constitutes a Black feminist praxis, a search for ideas that inform practice and practice that simultaneously shapes ideas” (88). As Stewart speaks out on the behalf of African Americans and women, as she calls upon her audiences to determine their individual and communal identity, their moral and political liberty, she articulates and acts out the terms of a nineteenth-century black feminism.

Maria Stewart was the first American woman to give a public speech to “promiscuous audiences,” racially mixed audiences of men and women, with her September 4, 1832, speech in Boston’s Franklin Hall. Encouraged by the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who published three of her four essays in *The Liberator*, Stewart lashed out against prejudice, slavery, and inequality, and called upon her audiences to strive to better themselves through religious or secular efforts, and to press for freedom and equality. Speaking to an audience for which “spirituality provided a gateway to political thought” (Peterson 56), she could expect that they would be accustomed to her message. Indeed, the African Baptist Church of Boston provided an early forum for Garrison and other abolitionists, and in 1832 became the home of the New England Anti-Slavery Society (Horton 35). Declaring slavery inconsistent with the state constitution, the Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1783 had abolished slavery, freeing blacks within its borders and becoming a kind of mecca for escaped slaves from the south and an

important link in the Underground Railroad. James Oliver Horton says of antebellum Boston that it “never matched its reputation for racial egalitarianism, yet compared to most other northern cities, . . . Boston was a racially tolerant place,” even if it was also racially segregated (29). It is in this anti-slavery climate and an African American community that valued women for their social, political, and economic contributions (Horton and Horton 21) that Maria Stewart, a domestic with little formal education, stepped forward to speak for racial and sexual equality and freedom. But this same Boston community was not used to having public messages delivered by a woman, and when Stewart criticized the black community, especially its men, for chasing frivolous entertainments instead of improving themselves, she felt compelled to leave the public arena. Though she unsettled the gendered construction of the podium and contested the location of rhetoric, her mobility posed a threat to patriarchy, and on September 21, 1833, she delivered her farewell address, saying, “The bitterness of my soul has departed from those who endeavored to discourage and hinder me . . .” (82). Even so, her *Productions* provides a model of the rhetoric of mobility that formed a feminist praxis for Stewart and other nineteenth-century northern black women like Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, and Sojourner Truth who also dared to take their messages to public audiences.

Stewart’s spiritual and political mobility derive from and are authorized by her conversion to Christianity and her desire to bring others to God. She writes, “From the moment I experienced the change, I felt a strong desire . . . to devote the remainder of my days to piety and virtue” (4). Kimberly Connor points out that “the word conversion derives from the Latin conversio, which means a turning, and the Greek metanoia, which means transformation”(27); it is “a movement from profane to sacred” that implies the spiritual journey, pilgrimage, quest of the converted individual that authorizes other mobilities (Connor 36). As Stewart puts it, “I felt as though I was commanded to come out from the world and be separate; to go forward and be baptized” (73). *Productions*, composed of spiritual meditations and political speeches, is replete with the language of conversion, which is also a language of movement, of changing direction, a turning of the soul toward God that takes place on the vertical axis. Using verbs that denote movement—“come,” “turn,” “fly,” “walk”—Stewart enjoins her readers to conversion, urging them to “Come, turn to God,” “Return” to God, “Come, let us turn unto the Lord our God . . . and walk before the Lord our God”, to “fly to the Saviour before the door of mercy is for ever shut against you” (9, 13, 15, 34). Describing herself as one “who is traveling towards Mount Zion, the city of our God” (40), she urges her readers likewise to live so that they “may enter through the gates into the holy city” (43). Configuring salvation in spatial terms (she speaks of crossing a threshold—a gate or door), Stewart also constructs mobility along the vertical axis (she assumes movement toward God is upward bound), suggesting as she does so “a defiance of gravity,” to use geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s words, (28), an association with the sacred and cosmic, with mythic space and time, and with the “highest” values (Tuan 37, 131).

This kind of language gives secular activities of “uplift,” equality, and freedom a sense of the sacred, especially when it organizes social projects and political emancipation on the vertical axis. The very term “uplift” suggests movement upward, as when Stewart urges her audience “to raise ” (70) and “elevate”(80) themselves with projects of self-cultivation and social improvement, which to a large extent are also spatial achievements. She urges, “Cultivate your own minds and morals; real merit will elevate you. Pure religion will burst your fetters. Turn your attention to industry. Strive to please your employers. Lay up what you earn” (80). And she warns against the dens of sin: “I would implore our men, and especially our rising youth, to flee the gambling board and the dance-hall; for we are poor, and have no money to throw away”

(7). Speaking of the situation of women (and we can infer the situation of African Americans), Daphne Spain points out that “spatial segregation is one of the mechanisms by which a group with greater power can maintain its advantage over a group with less power. By controlling access to knowledge and resources through the control of space, the dominant group’s activity to retain and reinforce its position is enhanced. “Thus,” she argues, “spatial boundaries contribute to the unequal status of women. For women to become more knowledgeable, they must also change places” (15-16). Understanding both the racial and the gendered quotients of space as well as the spatial condition of knowledge and power, Stewart urges her female readers to join together to build a high school in the black community of Boston. She writes, “Let every female heart become united, and let us raise a fund ourselves; and at the end of one year and a half, we might be able to lay the corner-stone for the building of a High School, that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us; and God would raise us up, and enough to aid us in our laudable designs” (16). The production of knowledge, as many postcolonial scholars point out, has historically been controlled by a patriarchal hegemony, controlling not only what constitutes “knowledge” but who has access to or disseminates knowledge and hence power—power to control one’s life and the exercise of it over others. Stewart seeks to disrupt hegemonic mechanisms of power through her discourses, which urge women and blacks to transgress spatial and hence cultural barriers, but she also acts out that disruption by crossing over into male territory when she takes to the public arena, going to Franklin Hall and the African Masonic Hall to deliver her message. By contesting access to knowledge, the schools and the podium, Stewart also contests the prevailing “power geometry”—the social relations of domination and subordination that are configured in space and that attempt “social control on identity”(Massey 265, 179). That is why Stewart and women like her met with considerable resistance when they crossed over into the male domain and why they had to cross over.

And that is why the politics of civil rights is often configured in the rhetoric of mobility (we need only remember Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial), the freedom to move and to cross boundaries primary goals of political equality and tools in the realignment of the geometry of power. Constructing a counter narrative of the nation, Stewart urges political action in terms of mobility by asking her African American audience: “Why sit ye here and die? If we say we will go to a foreign land, . . . there shall we die. If we sit here, we shall die. Come let us plead our cause before the whites . . .” Countering the stasis of racist politics that attempted to keep blacks segregated and oppressed, Stewart urges mobilization—unified action and political movement—a metaphorical march to the state house that is conducted on both the horizontal axis of history and the vertical axis of transcendence. She calls on her audience to lift prayer upward to “the ears of the Lord of the Saboath [sic]” (56) and to “the Legislature for mercy’s sake to grant you all the rights and privileges of free citizens, that your daughters may rise to that degree of respectability which true merit deserves, and your sons above the servile situations which most of them fill” (56). In the lecture at Franklin Hall, a strong indictment of racist policies and the pernicious practice of slavery, she calls on “the American free people of color more assiduously [to strive for] moral and intellectual improvement,” connecting freedom with moral uplift, and political mobility with spiritual conversion.

When she addresses her audience, “descendents of fallen Africa” (55), “O ye sons of Africa” (66), when she calls out, “O, ye daughters of Africa, awake!” (6), she reminds them both of the long journey from Africa, the long trial of oppression, and of the projected journey home to a mythic Africa of promise, an “Ethiopia [that] shall stretch forth her hands unto [them]” (60).

She figures the soul's journey to Zion, ending Meditation IX thus: "Glory be to God in the highest, there is here and there a faithful one, who is traveling towards Mount Zion, the city of our God" (40). In the typology of the journey, which follows both historical and biblical lines or genealogies, she maps out a geo-politics and a geo-theology in which emancipation and salvation, oppression and sin "take place" in certain locations, in which movement is not just a migration but a conversion—a conversion of spirit by which the sons and daughters of Africa will come together, mobilize, enact their own intellectual, moral and political mobility. She calls out to the daughters of Africa, ". . . awake! awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves . . . we have a great work to do. Never, no, never will the chains of slavery and ignorance burst, till we become united as one, and cultivate among ourselves the pure principles of piety, morality and virtue" (6). Calling into being an active community, a "nation" of African Americans, Stewart charts their course across spatial and ideological boundaries. As Connor points out, "The goals of the political and spiritual quest [for nineteenth-century African American women] are essentially the same—the achievement of a worthwhile sense of self and a fundamentally positive identity" (47).

The journey to equality, Stewart learned, however, was contentious and difficult, her occupation of patriarchal locations of rhetoric apparently too great a threat to the power geometry at play in the black community of Boston. As William Nell, a leading figure among Boston's African Americans, put it, "her sentiments on the improvement of colored Americans, encountered an opposition even from her Boston circle of friends, that would have dampened the ardor of most women" (qtd in "Maria Stewart," 2). And on September 21, 1833, almost a year from her speech at Franklin Hall, Stewart bade farewell to the public arena and to Boston itself. The acrimony arising from her criticism of her community, particularly its men, made her "contemptible in the eyes of many" and she felt that her life had been a "disappointment" (81, 82). Though she continued to work for the cause of liberty, for the education of African American children in New York and Baltimore, and after the Civil War as Matron of the Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D. C., she would never again take her message before a "promiscuous" public audience. That would be left to other women like the itinerant preachers Jarena Lee and Julia Foote, and Sojourner Truth, all of whom tramped the country, contesting racist and sexist practices and institutions, joining spiritual conversion with political activism. Her Productions and the rhetoric of mobility she articulates "laid the foundation" for other African American women and exemplifies the concern of women around the world who too seek to break the bonds on their mobilities and freedoms (Hankins, screen 1).

Notes:

1. Maria Stewart, Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart (Boston: 1835) rpt. Spiritual Narratives, ed. Susan Houchins (New York: Oxford UP, 1988, p. 4). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically. I would like to thank Alabama State University's National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African-American Culture for awarding me a Summer Research Grant to pursue this study. Susan L. Roberson is Assistant Professor of English at Alabama State University.

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