

## Challenging the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ideals: Unobserved Sexual Transcripts in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*

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### ABSTRACT:

Sojourner Truth was a former slave in Hurley, New York becoming one of the main appreciable voices who defended by all means the right of the slaves before and after the emancipation of bondage back to the nineteenth century. Her very famous account entitled *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* was one of a kind as it exhibited a different form of the slave narratives counting on her friend Olive Gilbert to write for her. This work was a commercial success and gained admiration as well as sympathy to the slaves' case in general and Truth's life most specifically. Yet and Unlike other slaves' tales that belonged to the same period (the Antebellum Era), this one was a kind of tame concerning sexual harassment leaving multiple questions to be asked about the reasons which led both the writer and the amanuensis to present it in this manner. Henceforth, the fundamental purpose of this article is to uncover the different hidden sexual messages in *the Narrative of Sojourner Truth* and to answer the question in relation to Olive Gilbert's interference in the account.

**Keywords:** (*Slavery; Slave Narratives; Sexuality; Sojourner Truth; Olive Gilbert*)

### 1. Introduction :

In the year of 1850, the remarkable illiterate female slave, Sojourner Truth, defied the limitations imposed by her lack of literacy, publishing a narrative that traced her extensive physical and spiritual journey from enslavement to liberation. Given Truth's inability to read or write, she enlisted the assistance of Olive Gilbert, a friend who assumed the role of amanuensis for the book. This narrative achieved not only commercial success but also critical acclaim, earning praise from both literary scholars and enthusiasts. It stands as a significant work and a milestone in the genre of slave narratives published during the Antebellum Era, playing a pivotal role in the broader abolitionist movement in the United States.

What sets Truth's account apart is its distinctive tone, adopted style, and the thematic elements embraced, all overseen by a white editor, Olive Gilbert. This aspect adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, making it captivating for both Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert. However, as successive generations of readers engage with the narrative, diverse perspectives, conceptions, and interpretations come to the forefront. Readers bring their unique lenses to the literary work, uncovering

subtle nuances and differences that may have been overlooked by the initial audience, forming the essence of this article.

Within the narrative, Olive Gilbert hints at a series of misfortunes experienced by the heroine (Sojourner Truth), incidents deemed too sensitive for public disclosure due to their delicate nature. This suggests the presence of hidden secrets and messages requiring nuanced consideration during the reading. Gilbert explicitly acknowledges intentional silence on certain aspects of Truth's life, citing "motives of delicacy" (p.30). This deliberate omission creates a stark juxtaposition with many other slave narratives, such as Harriet Jacobs' "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," which explicitly addresses the theme of sexual assault. The primary objective of this article is to unveil the concealed sexual messages within the Narrative of Sojourner Truth and explore whether Olive Gilbert independently excluded explicit content or collaborated with the protagonist in making this editorial decision.

## **2. Metamorphosis: An Enslaved Woman's Journey to Becoming the Libyan Sybil**

### **2.1 Innocence Shattered: Insights into Sojourner Truth's Early Years**

Sojourner Truth, originally named Isabella, entered the world in Ulster County, a mere twenty miles from New York, during a pivotal era in the United States' development. This period was marked by the country's burgeoning independence and the establishment of its foundational laws and principles, with George Washington at the helm for a second presidential term (Murphy, 2011, p.1). However, amid the lofty ideals encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence and the federal Constitution, a stark contradiction took root—slavery.

Born to parents James and Betsey, affectionately known as Mau-mau Bett, Sojourner Truth's familial roots traced back to Guinea in Africa. Despite their African origins, they became part of a Dutch family, embracing European names as was customary among slaves in their environment. The household communicated exclusively in Dutch, shaping Isabella's linguistic landscape during her early years.

Isabella's actual date of birth remained elusive, a consequence of both her illiteracy and the absence of comprehensive slave records. Various historical estimates propose birth years around 1776 or 1777, linked to a significant event—an enigmatic "dark day" when the sun mysteriously dimmed (Murphy, 2011, p.1). The lack of precise information about her birth became a recurring theme in her life, adding an additional layer of complexity to her narrative.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding her birth, a document from a former slaveholder in 1834 provided some insights. According to this document, Isabella, at the time, was estimated to be between twelve and fourteen years old in 1810,

suggesting a probable birth year around 1797 (Mabee, 1995, p.2). This temporal context and the subsequent challenges she faced as a slave became integral aspects of Sojourner Truth's remarkable journey from bondage to freedom.

## **2.2 Chains Unbound: A Voyage Through Oppression**

Isabella underwent a series of master transitions during her enslavement, starting with Colonel Hardenbergh, who passed away when she was an infant. Subsequently, she fell under the ownership of his son Charles, alongside her parents. Vivid memories of the cellar shared by all the slaves on the Hardenbergh estate haunted her, a place where she recalls "inmates of both sexes and all ages sleeping on those damp boards." The grim chamber, dimly lit by a few panes of glass, left an indelible mark on Isabella, who believed the sun seldom penetrated its confines (Gilbert, 1850, p. 2).

One haunting incident etched in Isabella's memory was witnessing the auction of her mother, who had about twelve children. This heart-wrenching scene unfolded as her mother was sold before their eyes. Concurrently, she admired Mau-mau Bett's unwavering faith, having imparted the Lord's prayers and the belief in seeking divine help during times of distress (Gilbert, 1850, p.4). Isabella likely inherited aspects of African religious traditions, acknowledging a tangible connection between humans and spirits.

Her enslavement continued when Truth's master passed away when she was nine. She, along with her young brother, was promptly thrust into an auction, separated from their parents. James, deemed too old to work, and Betsey, given the opportunity to care for her husband, were granted freedom by the family. Isabella found herself in the hands of John Neely, a store owner in Kingston, embarking on a new chapter that brought rare encounters with her parents. Unfortunately, she learned of her mother's death and witnessed her aging, abandoned, and blind father succumb to the harsh elements (Mabee, 1995, p.3).

Life under John Neely's roof subjected Isabella to a barrage of insults and beatings. Communication hurdles, with Neely speaking English and Isabella Dutch, added to the challenges. In this difficult period, she started receiving religious instructions, introducing her to God and instilling the habit of prayer. A significant turning point came when a fisherman named Scriver purchased her, providing a semblance of relief. Although life with Scriver was tolerable, it fell short of Isabella's aspirations, described as a period "devoid of hardship or terror as it was of improvement." She accepted an offer to live with John Dumont, launching an eighteen-year enslavement (p.19).

Marriage to a fellow slave named Thomas occurred during her time with Dumont, resulting in five children. However, the precarious nature of slave

marriages, unrecognized by American law, meant she witnessed the sale of her children, mirroring her mother's experience. Despite contentment with Dumont, whom she esteemed highly, Isabella harbored a yearning for freedom. Her plea for liberty was met with resistance, prompting her escape to Isaac Van Vagner's home. Dumont's pursuit and insistence on reclaiming her child were met with staunch refusal. Van Vagner intervened, proposing to purchase her remaining service from Dumont, ultimately setting her on the path to freedom. Grateful for Van Vagner's generosity, Isabella adopted the name Isabella Van Vagner. Her newfound freedom, however, revealed the distressing sale of her five-year-old son Peter by her former master. This injustice fueled Isabella's determination, leading her to become the first African American woman to win a case against a white individual in American courts, securing the reunion with her child (Washington, 2007, p.58).

### **2.3 From Freedom to Advocacy: Charting the Course of Activism**

After getting her freedom, Isabella found a job as a housekeeper in New York, where she always tried to be pious and respectful in her behavior regarding the others in order to “bow to the filth of the city” (Gilbert, 1850, p.56). Yet, she was overall unsure and hesitant about herself, particularly as she was in a phase of adaptation, trying to discover her true identity, potential, and future. Isabella experienced a lifetime transformation, as she “fulfilled a miraculous telepathic prophecy, proof, she believed, that God had chosen her as a sanctified messenger” (Carby, 1989, p.72).

She joined a Methodist church that included Black people but was predominantly for white Americans at the beginning. She shifted to a Black one called the Zion church, which was actually against differentiation. Through a series of gradual steps, it became the mother church of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion connection (De Witt, 1943, p.104). Isabella started her adventure to open the area of education. She circulated among people asking for help, and she received it from Methodists, benevolent whites, and Quakers as well. However, she had a sort of handicap, her inability to read from the Bible and her incompetence in guiding her son for his homework, and it was here that she discovered her skill in preaching. She joined a group called the Kingdom led by Elijah Pierson, who took her to Robert Matthews, who called himself Father Matthias. Isabella was intrigued by his charismatic behavior, his art in convincing people, and this made her fall into real trouble. She finally was accused of helping him commit a murder and grand theft under the veil of religion. Isabella was upset and disappointed as she discovered his cheating. It was here that she received an extraordinary call from the spirit to leave

the city of filth (New York) to the countryside to preach and help people. She changed her name from Isabella to Sojourner Truth.

She traveled east to multiple places, preaching and learning simultaneously about religion, where she was welcomed with great enthusiasm. By 1844, she settled in Massachusetts, joining the Northampton Association. There she interacted, traded barbs, argued the Bible, and talked politics with the nation's most uncompromising reformers, including Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Rev. Samuel J. May. She also met Olive Gilbert there and developed a solid friendship, especially as they shared similar reform and socio-political views. Gilbert agreed to write the account, and Garrison edited and arranged it for publication in 1850, to be sold to the public for the dual purposes of gaining a livelihood for Sojourner Truth and authenticating her voice as a record of history against slavery (Sheffield, 1894, p.237).

Apart from her Narrative, Sojourner Truth was one of the iconic women ever. She was an active member of American society, particularly after the Civil War, where she raised funds, provided assistance to the poor, spoke about spiritualism, politics, and women's rights. Notably, her famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech would last eternally. Harriet Beecher Stowe was a fan of Sojourner Truth, and she was the first to name her the Libyan Sybil in an article for her magazine, which came out in 1863, as she tried to introduce her to the audience. Later on, Frances D. Cage compared Truth's discreet silence in Akron to a "Libyan Statue," saying that she was similar to a "Libyan Sybil" in her appearance in Akron. Traveling throughout the north with a carpetbag full of her little books, sheet music of her own songs, and her "victuals," Sojourner Truth testified against oppression wherever she found it" (Cutler, 1895, p.12).

### **3. Cryptic Sexual Messages in The Narrative of Sojourner Truth**

Revisiting key aspects of Sojourner Truth's narrative becomes essential in uncovering potential hidden sexual messages. These elements provide insights into her character, personality, orientations, and, most significantly, her association with Olive Gilbert, the writer of the narrative. Each of these components plays a critical role in unraveling the nuances of the work, particularly when juxtaposed with similar narratives from the same period. Furthermore, the exploration that follows will shed light on whether there was interference from the amanuensis, altering the narrative's course as we currently understand it, or if there existed a genuine collaboration and agreement on the perspectives to present, aligning with Sojourner Truth's intentions.

As pointed out before, *the Narrative of Sojourner Truth* does not include a clear sexual display in any chapter of it unlike other works such as *Incidents in the Life of a*

*Slave Girl* or even *the Autobiography of a Female Slave* due to several reasons whether from the amanuensis or even the protagonist herself. The first part that catches the attention of the readers is Isabella's story with her master John Dumont who she exhibited him as cruel to her but never mentioned to be a victim of the least sexual assault. This is somehow bizzare when we see the treatment she got from him. There is an instance from her narrative as she described one morning being exposed to the most brutal flogging she ever got "till her flesh deeply lacerated" (Gilbert, 1850, p.26). So, it is quite difficult to believe that she never experienced harassment from Dumont particularly that a certain language in the work and with an attentive reading, could hint some sexual content that has been mysteriously hidden and in fact some literary scholars indicate that young Isabella and Dumont were sexual partners and probably she was forced to be (Mabee, 1995, p.114). What makes the idea so true is the unexplainable tension between her and Dumont's wife. Of course, racism could never be rejected but according to various scholars Elizabeth Dumont was never educated and familiar to slaves which put other interrogative marks.

We can compare what happened to Isabella with Dumont to Harriet Jacobs and Dr. Flint with a slight change because while Jacobs resisted and left her master in favour to another man, young Isabella probably submitted against Dumont which was explained indirectly in the account as Isabella confessed that her master liked her as it is mentioned here "this wench (pointing to Isabel) is better to a man (Gilbert, 1850, p.33) which explains her attitude towards him as she worked literally day and night just to please him because she saw and even believed him a "God" the most powerful one to be served and satisfied. There is another evidence which favoured the same idea which is about Isabella's personal life since as well know was married two times one to the unfortunate Robert and the second one to old Thomas and later on found herself a mother of five children. The narrative is tamed about the fathers of her sons but they were noted as present in the household. John Dumont one day walks into the house and heard one of them crying, he ordered Isabella to take care of the child, if no more works gets done for a week and he also remained to ensure that orders were not countermanded (Washington, 2007, p.63). Isabella's first child and from other sources except the account itself was named James after her death father and it is perhaps the subject of jealousy and tension between her and Dumont's wife because he was the father. Isabella had a second daughter named Diana who she was known to be related to the Dumont family more than her brothers and sisters and she acquired "Dumont" as a surname and stayed a long period with them.

Isabella was aged twenty three when she was married to Thomas and started (again) to have children (Elizabeth, Sophia and Peter). This is somehow weird which explains the end of her relationship with Dumont because the question that arouse is

who fathered her previous ones? It is most likely John Dumont who at least was the father of James or Diana if we consider her relationship with Robert her lover which ended was ended by Dumont himself. This gives a better explanation to the logical hatred between her and Elizabeth Dumont especially that the majority of the ones served in that house recalled that Isabella and Thomas' relationship was cold and the reason behind that was the presence of John Dumont.

Twelve years old Isabella was sold after her suffering in Nealy's house to a fisherman named Scryver who owned at the same time a tavern where our protagonist spent a different life there devoid of brutality and horror but it was a kind of outdoor one as she had these tasks of preparing crops for percolating alcohol for example. Socially, she lived under drunk people and with a man (her master) and his three unmarried sons which enhances the idea of being exposed to the assault and we can tell from the environment the young enslaved girl was in particularly after what Olive Gilbert (1850) states "While Isabella was at Scryver house she led an unimproved life; morally she retrograded and there she took her first oath" (p.29)

To finish up this point, we can deduce that the silence which characterizes *the Narrative of Sojourner Truth* in terms of sexual themes was intentional from both Truth and Gilbert due to historical and even personal reasons mentioned above which explain plainly why the work seemed "tame" and it has no relationship with bashfulness knowing that by 1858 and to prove her womanhood, Sojourner Truth exposed her back to show the different scars she had and even her breasts in public. Therefore, this audacity does not really match with what is seen in her account especially when it mentioned "from motives of delicacy". The split between Sojourner the author and Sojourner the activist raises the question of who had "no desire to publish" the hard things that crossed Isabella's life in slavery, and why (Washington, 2007, p.64).

#### **4. Ambiguity Unveiled: Navigating the Interplay Between Truth and Gilbert**

From their first meeting within the Northampton association, Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert entered into a collaborative venture, aspiring to distill the profound experiences of the former enslaved woman into a historical account. However, their shared goal took an unexpected turn, particularly when it came to specific intimate details, as highlighted in earlier examples from Truth's narrative. This critical analysis aims to further examine the intricacies of their collaboration, drawing insights from diverse sources to unravel the complexities and determine the predominant influence within this intricate partnership. American scholar Sidonie Smith (1993) said that "collaborative projects raise complex questions about who speaks in the text and whose story is being told, about who maintains control over the narrative and by

implication over the purposes to which the story is put” (p.124) which triggers even distinct questions about the work’s accuracy as Gilbert was harshly criticized by other literary critics for silencing Truth intentionally several times in the account. For example, “From this source arose a long series of trials in the life of our heroine, which we must pass over in silence” (Gilbert, 1850, p.36) which suggests the idea of having plenty of problems and tensions in privacy between the protagonist and the writer. Nell Painter (1997) alerts that this “is due to Truth’s refusal to disclose the particulars of this ‘long series of trials’ (p.248). He also continues “The outline of Olive Gilbert’s life is unclear, the joint project provides nearly all the extant information about her, some of which can be glimpsed only between the lines” (104). Well, it could happen that both were agreed to skip those details as Truth suffered from Trauma in recalling these things playing on the point that the readers are already aware of the cruelties of bondage but the most probable thing is that this was a sort of signaling tensions in private space.

There is another one who believes that the voice of Olive Gilbert was not only apparent but disturbing as well as he states “Her remarks are merely distracting when she expresses the familiar abolitionist moral condemnations of slave owners...” (Stewart, 1991 p.38). Speaking about the voice itself, one thing that is also noticeable is the use of a third-person point of view in the Narrative of Sojourner Truth which is supposed to be an autobiography no matter how it is penned. Painter (1998) comments again on this by saying “Gilbert, tells the story in the third person and inserts her views (p.xxi) and the majority of critics agree on this point because her voice was obvious in different parts of work as she tried to cover the protagonist’s one.

Yet, there are some other scholars’ views which are positive towards the account as they have offered other readings for Truth/Gilbert collaboration and who see that there was first a balance between the two voices and there are multiple reasons which explain the seemingly predominant voice of the amanuensis which will be exhibited in the next few lines.

Jean M. Humez (1996) points out that Sojourner Truth was dynamic rather than just passive and had control over her work far from being naïve because “Though Gilbert controlled the pen and felt free to insert editorial comments in her voice, it appears that she did not feel free to omit positive assertions by Truth - after all, she presumably had to read the final text back to the storyteller for approval before it could go into print” (p.36). This one here confirms that Truth indeed participated in the project and dominated also the events. The American scholar adds that “This text, despite its use of a narrator's voice to summarize events in a third-person narrative and to insert editorial opinions and judgments within the narrative, has sometimes



been called a “dictated autobiography”. I would prefer to acknowledge its thoroughly collaborative production process by calling it a “mediated” or “facilitated” autobiography” (p30).

A true collaboration refers to harmony and involvement and this exists actually in the Narrative of Sojourner Truth as both women attempted to “find common ground and opening up a conversation through common interests” (Salie, p.18). So their voices complete each other in the example of this one “We have said, Isabella was married to Thomas” and that “we” suggests how Truth and Gilbert decided what to write of through conversation” (Gilbert, 1850, p.). So having both voices conversing with each other explains why both women have chosen each other “how strategic Truth was in choosing Gilbert to write the Narrative. In Gilbert, she may have seen someone who understands her. This idea suggests that Truth and Gilbert became friends developing intimacy over the years (Salie, 2019, p.19). This point is confirmed by Olive Gilbert (1850) herself in the account as she asserts “believe me to be your true friend and well-wisher, now and forevermore” (p.284)

Reading this work this way referring to conversation and friendship between the two women drives us to the form of this work and the narrative style adopted which is the non-linear as it shows also a noticeable thing relatively to their collaboration as “Gilbert signals her respect for Truth’s voice by representing something of the fragmentary non-linear accounts of Truth’s memories of her family” (Salie, 2019, p.19). Sojourner Truth spoke about her entire life from childhood to adulthood but the conventional form of the work was always disconnected by her memories especially about the members of the family. For instance, when she described her mother in the middle of referring to self-education in terms of religion which makes Gilbert (1850) saying “Her mother, as we have already said, talked to her of God” (p.23). These changes made the amanuensis interfere to shape the autobiography in an unorthodox way appearing much more a conversation rather than anything else. This structure may confuse the readers as Humez (1996) said “There are many indications in the Narrative of Sojourner Truth that the text was produced concurrently with the interview process, with comparatively little editing and no major rewriting. Though the lack of editorial reorganization makes for a less coherent narrative and some confusion for the reader, it is a positive boon for the historian trying to reconstruct the original interview process” (p.35). Jean Humez viewed the account’s defect is the “editorial reorganization” impact but it can be read distinctly as an inventive choice made by Olive Gilbert not only to save the situation while interviewing Truth but to convey a message to the audience about their partnership and chemistry.

Last but not least, the language used in this work is also a key to notice the respect and admiration Gilbert had for Truth and also a reference to their communion as there is the term “quaint” employed by the writer to describe the protagonist. The

way it is used is interesting especially that it refers to someone wise or smart according to the Oxford English Dictionary which determines Truth's fine and painstaking choice of words and expressions in her account. Moreover, Gilbert practically never used dialect in order to deliver the sense of the otherness by Sojourner Truth using her language. Jean Humez (1996) admires such a thing as he states: "This decision makes a tremendous difference in the dignity of the portrait she drew perhaps especially for a modern reader. Gilbert's decision may reflect a genuine respect for Truth's eloquence in speaking" (p.33).

## 5. Conclusion:

Sojourner Truth's narrative stands as a captivating exploration of the enigmatic and unique, catching the attention of literary critics for its distinct presentation of slave tales and its unconventional approach to portraying a protagonist in the crucial historical context of the United States. The significance of delving into Isabella's story becomes even more apparent when considering its role in shaping the narrative's orientation and unraveling the intricate relationship between the writer and the protagonist.

Isabella's tumultuous journey under five different masters serves as a poignant lens through which the brutalities of slavery are exposed. Her accounts bear witness to the unspeakable horrors of torture, the dehumanizing specter of humiliation, and the hidden but palpable issue of sexual assault. This article, therefore, endeavors to navigate the complex terrain of Sojourner Truth's narrative, scrutinizing the intriguing contradictions that emerge between her perspective and that of Olive Gilbert. The collaborative effort between Truth and Gilbert raises compelling questions about power dynamics and authorship, urging an exploration into who truly held the reins in this literary work.

A crucial juncture in the analysis is the examination of the cryptic phrase "by motives of delicacy," a pivotal starting point for unraveling the obscured layers of sexual transcripts within the Narrative of Sojourner Truth. The narrative spotlight shifts to Isabella's interactions with different masters, particularly focusing on her traumatic experiences with John Nealy. While Nealy's severe beatings are recounted, the absence of explicit mention of sexual abuse raises intriguing implications. This omission becomes especially noteworthy given the prevalence of such experiences among female slaves during this dark period of history.

The narrative then weaves through the shadowy contours of Isabella's life with the fisherman Scryver, an episode steeped in ambiguity. Only fragments of the hardships she endured are unveiled, leaving much to the imagination. Yet, her

assertion that her life deteriorated during this period hints at potential harassment, casting a poignant shadow over her existence, especially considering Scryver's unmarried status and his household dynamics with three single sons.

The exploration culminates in Isabella's relationship with John Dumont, a master who, intriguingly, becomes her favored figure. The deliberate omission of personal details, akin to the approach of Harriet Jacobs, suggests a clandestine relationship that potentially fueled jealousy in Dumont's wife, adding layers of sorrow to Isabella's life with her husband.

The article's investigation then shifts gears to scrutinize the collaboration between Truth and Gilbert, dissecting the dynamics to discern whether the amanuensis played a role in shaping the narrative beyond mere transcription. Despite moments of Gilbert's intrusiveness, the underlying intention is not to alter events but to shape a cohesive narrative. This realization paints the narrative as a non-linear masterpiece, akin to a conversation between two confidantes, wherein the authenticity of Sojourner Truth's voice remains undiluted.

Sojourner Truth's narrative thus emerges as a strategic undertaking by a prominent black woman, embracing a duty and mission to recount a deeply personal and free experience. Her narrative serves as a powerful catalyst, stirring consciousness and activism, and standing as the resounding voice of millions of African Americans affected by the shackles of slavery. Despite the seemingly "tame" nature of her account "by motives of delicacy," Truth's narrative is a canonical saga pulsating with the collective experiences of a people, making an indelible contribution to the emancipation of slavery. Her post-emancipation activism underscores the enduring impact she had on shaping the destiny of subsequent generations of African Americans, solidifying her legacy as a trailblazer in the fight for freedom and equality.

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