

WE MEET THE MONSTER PREJUDICE EVERY WHERE

Clarissa C. Lawrence



On May 1-3, 1839, the third national women's antislavery convention was held in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania Riding School, "no better place being available for so unpopular a gathering," writes Quaker (Black Abolitionists, 28). At the previous year's convention, white mobs outraged at the gathering of black and white women "sitting together in unadorned ease" had disrupted the speeches at Pennsylvania Hall, then burned down the building. The mayor of Philadelphia asked Lucretia Mott to ensure that those attending the 1839 convention "avoid unnecessary walking with colored people" and conclude their business as soon as possible.

On May 3, 1839, the last day of the convention, Clarissa C. Lawrence, the president of the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem (formed by black women in 1833), addressed the gathering. Lawrence had also served as vice president of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society, a reorganized and racially integrated version of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, the earliest known antislavery organization formed by black women, founded February 22, 1832.

Lawrence rose to second the resolution "that henceforth we will increase our efforts to improve the condition of our free colored population, by giving them mechanical, literary, and religious instruction, and assisting to establish them in trades, and such other employments as are now denied them on account of their color." The motion was adopted. The 1839 convention was the last held by the antislavery women, "the time having come for their admission to the hitherto all-male societies" (Quakers, Black Abolitionists, 28).

While returning from New York on an overnight packet, Lawrence broke the color bar by sharing a cabin with a white woman. A vote taken among the passengers the next day condemned their actions, and proslavery forces created a scandal from the incident, citing it as proof that abolition would promote integration. For an account of the controversy, see the *Liberator*, May 24 and 31, 1839.

The text of the speech is taken from the Proceedings of the Third Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in Philadelphia, May 1, 2, 3, 1839 (Philadelphia: Merrillson and Thompson, 1839), 8-9. See also Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford, 1969), 28-29; Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1984), 115-17; and Shirley Yee, *Black*

Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 82-89.

SLAVERY PRESSES DOWN UPON THE FREE PEOPLE OF COLOR

Andrew Harris



Most black abolitionists sought to emphasize the connectedness of "free" blacks and slaves, and the relationships between the institution of slavery and the systematic discrimination experienced by African Americans in the North. Andrew Harris (1810-1841) graduated from the University of Vermont in 1838, having been refused admission to Union and Middlebury Colleges on the basis of race. In his address delivered to nearly five thousand abolitionists at New York City's Broadway Tabernacle on May 7, 1839, Harris argues that the existence of slavery in the South fuels racial prejudice in the North. It is the dissemination of slavery's "deadly poison," he suggests, that leads the northern "lords of these institutions" of higher education to "rise up and shut the door" when African American students apply for admission.

Harris poignantly observes the dilemma facing free blacks when "wrongs are inflicted upon us that are grievous and heavy to be borne." If they remained silent in the face of oppression ("fold our arms and bear

We meet the monster prejudice every where. We have not power to contend with it, we are so down-trodden. We cannot elevate ourselves. You must aid us. We have been brought up in ignorance, our parents were ignorant, they could not teach us. We want light, we ask it, and it is denied us. Why are we thus treated? Prejudice is the cause. It kills its thousands every day; it follows us every where, even to the grave; but, blessed be God! it stops there. You must pray it down. Faith and prayer will do wonders in the anti-slavery cause. Place yourselves, dear friends, in our stead. We are blamed for not filling useful places in society; but give us light, give us learning, and see then what places we can occupy. Go on, I entreat you. A brighter day is dawning. I bless God that the young are interested in this cause. It is worth coming all the way from Massachusetts, to see what I have seen here. ■

it"), this silence was used to rationalize the oppression, if, on the other hand, they spoke out in protest, they risked mob violence. Harris offers no answer but makes clear his determination to endure whatever might be inflicted upon him in America rather than emigrate to colonize another land.

The text of the speech is taken from The Sixth Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society (New York: William S. Dorr, 1839).

It is with no pleasant feeling, said he, that I stand here to speak in relation to the wrongs of a portion of the inhabitants of this country, who, by their complexion, are identified with myself. It is with feeling of great responsibility that I stand here as their representative.

Who of our Pilgrim fathers, when they entered ship, and committed themselves to the waves—when the breeze carried back the echo of their songs, ever thought the day would come, when an assembly like this would meet on the island of Manhattan, for such an object? Who would then have supposed, that the oppression and wrongs of millions in this country, would have been so great as to call together an audience like this? If an inhabitant of another world should enter one of these doors, and look abroad upon these thousands, and ask, "For what are you assembled?" and the voice of this multitude should be heard in answer, "We have come to hear and converse about the wrongs of our fellow men," would he esteem it a light or trifling thing, which has brought this audience together?

But from whence spring these wrongs? The original source from which they spring, is the corruption of the human heart. The beginning of its development is slavery. Shall I again point to the South, and depict the sufferings of the slave? If the groans and sighs of the victims of slavery could be collected, and thrown out here in one volley, these walls would tremble, these pillars would be removed from their foundations, and we should find ourselves buried in the ruins of the edifice. If the blood of the innocent, which has been shed by slavery, could be poured out here, this audience might swim in it—or if they could not swim they would be drowned. If the tears that slavery has caused to be shed, were poured out here, there might be a sea on which to ply the oar in exercise of sport and diversion. But this is not all—the anguish produced by separation of husband and wife, children and parents, and the scourges of the defenseless and unoffending slave, are a fathomless sea, and an ocean without a shore.

But slavery does not stop here. It presses down upon the free people of color. Its deadly poison is disseminated from the torrid regions of the South to the frigid North. We feel it here. Yet, with all this, if the colored man is vicious, or if he is not elevated, it is set down to his natural stupidity and depravity, and the argument is raised that he belongs to an inferior race. The colored people are also charged with want of desire for education and improvement, yet, if a colored man comes to the door of our institutions of

learning, with desires ever so strong, the lords of these institutions rise up and shut the door, and then you say we have not the desire not the ability to acquire education. Thus, while the white youth enjoy all these advantages, we are excluded and shut out, and must remain ignorant. It is natural to suppose, then, that there should be more crime among us. But is this crime properly chargeable to the colored man, as evidence of the vicious propensities of his race?

Again, in the social relations of life, wrongs are inflicted upon us that are grievous and heavy to be borne, and we must fold our arms and bear it. But even this is thrown out as a taunt against us, that we do not speak of our wrongs, as evidence that we are too stupid and degraded to feel them; while, if we rise to defend ourselves and to plead our cause, the torch and the brick-bat are poured out as arguments on the other side. As a specimen, I will mention what I experienced in my passage to this city, from the city of "brotherly love," so called; but as to the claim it has upon that title, I leave the ruins of Pennsylvania Hall to answer.* On the way, they refused to give the colored man a seat, but put him up in boxes, as they would monkeys or wild geese. And why was this? Was it because he had no money? No. Was it because he was not decently clad? No. Was it because he was an idiot, and they feared he would annoy the company with his foolishness? No—it is because he has the complexion which God has given him. The bible says the love of money is the root of all evil, and if the love of money is a predominant passion anywhere, it is in this land. Yet, without disputing the correctness of the declaration, it seems to me that slavery had developed a passion in the human heart that is stronger than the love of money; for they refuse to gratify this disposition which the bible says is the root of all evil, through the influence of that still deeper root of evil, *prejudice*.

Again: the colored man is deprived of the opportunity of obtaining those situations in society which his enemies say he ought to hold, if capable. If he wishes to be useful as a professional man, a merchant or a mechanic, he is prevented by the color of his skin, and driven to those menial employments which tend to bring us more and more into disrepute.

The church itself was not free from participation in the general guilt of oppressing the black man. He feared that some of her pastors would in the great day, have the Judge say to them, "though ye have cast out devils in my name, yet this devil of prejudice you have not cast out of your own hearts—and though you may have done many wonderful works, one great work, that of emancipating the slave, ye have left undone."

Time would fail me, said he, to depict all these wrongs. Yet, with all the oppression and odium that is heaped upon us here, I for one would rather stand and endure it all, choosing rather to suffer affliction with my people, than to emigrate to a foreign shore, though I might there enjoy the pleasures of Egypt. And while I live, let my prayer be, that the same soil which cher-


* Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Hall was burned by an antiabolitionist mob on May 17, 1838.

ished my father may cherish me, and when I die, that the same dust may cover me that covered the ashes of my father. ■

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LET US DO JUSTICE TO AN UNFORTUNATE PEOPLE

Thomas Paul

 The following speech by Thomas Paul, who was described as "a Colored Student of Dartmouth College," was delivered before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society on January 27, 1841. Paul was the son of the pastor of the African Baptist Church in Boston, and when Garrison first published the *Liberator*, young Paul assisted him as an apprentice. He had been a student at the antislavery academy at Canaan, New Hampshire, until its building had been dragged away by farmers protesting its interracial character. Later, he became the first African American graduate of Dartmouth College. In 1849, Paul was appointed as the first African American headmaster of the Smith School in Boston, following protests about the racist behavior of the school's all-white staff toward black pupils. Paul and the Smith school became focal points for the Massachusetts struggle over segregated education. Black boycotts of the school continued after Paul's appointment and it closed after the state passed an integrated education law in 1855.

Paul begins this speech with a reflexive analysis of the rhetorical situations facing himself and other abolitionist speakers—the burdens of proving the self-evident, of undermining the prejudices that obscure sound judgment, and of revealing horrors denied or obscured by others. Directed to fellow antislavery activists, Paul's address is a good example of the intraorganizational appeals necessary to sustain a social or political movement.

The speech is reprinted from the National Anti-Slavery Standard of April 1, 1841. For more information on Paul and the battle over school segregation in Boston, see James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 70–75.

MR. PRESIDENT. I have often asked myself, what posterity would think of the strange contest in which the abolitionists are engaged.

Here we meet, time after time, newspapers are printed and speeches delivered, to prove—what? Why, that a man is a man, and that he is the only human possessor of himself. But these propositions are self-evident propositions, and self-evident propositions we all know, though the most difficult to be proved, are the most easily understood, because they need no proof. The mind sees their truth intuitively, without the aid of reasoning. The attempt to prove them, therefore, would be ridiculous, were it not for the consideration of the amazing state of delusion and vassalage to which prejudice reduces the mind when unenlightened by reason.

The history of every age shows the truth of this assertion. At one time, we see Galileo thrown into prison by the Inquisition, because he had made some discoveries tending to confirm the Copernican system, and forced to purchase his liberty by retracting his opinions. Again, before the sacred page was punctuated, some of the Alexandria fathers placed a punctuation mark in one of the chapters of St. John's Gospel, Chrysostom, alarmed at this terrible innovation, denounced it as a heresy, and Epiphanius declared it blasphemous, and the sin against the Holy Ghost. When, therefore, we see the control which prejudice, aided by circumstances and encouraged by self-interest, has in times past exercised over the human mind, and the tenacity with which it has held its deluded victims, stopping up the avenues of improvement, clipping the wings of genius, and retarding the progress of truth—when we see the minds whose energies have been crippled, and whose spheres of action have been curtailed by its influence—when we see the tremendous power which reformers have brought to bear against the prevailing sins of the ages in which they lived, the firm opposition they encountered, and the long and arduous struggles which preceded a better state of things—we are led, by analogical reasoning, to believe, that the contest in which we are engaged is not an unnatural one—that it is not so dissimilar in its character and measures to others which have been carried triumphantly through—that the modern champions of freedom do not savor so much of quixotism as their traducers have represented—and that the unfortunate men, whose cause they have espoused, have as just a claim to humanity as their oppressors, and like them have been created a little lower than the angels.

In all moral reforms, too, there is a striking similarity in the various passions, qualities and traits of character called forth. The same zeal and boldness of the reformer—the same caution, distrust and timidity of the conservative, winning at this phrase, trembling at that expression, and whining about ultraism—the same headlong fury of the rabble, who, for want of something better, would fain

*'Prove their doctrines orthodox
By mobocratic blows and knocks'—*

the same rapid speed of truth when once elicited by reason and argument—and the same general results.

How was it five years ago in regard to the question of slavery! A gloom