SOJOURNER TRUTH

UNESCO Series on Women in African History
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Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Joubeaud
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LONG ISLAND, THE STATE OF NEW YORK, 1843....
BEHOLD HOW SERENELY THE OCEAN LIES...
“...but be not fooled, for in that dread beauty are veiled the nameless, numberless graves of our ancestors, extinguished during that grievous voyage from the African continent.”

“ALAS, NO! WOE TO THIS BLOODY LAND, CONCEIVED IN SLAVERY, AND DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL BLACK PEOPLE ARE CREATED UNEQUAL!”
“STILL WE ARE TRADED AS CHATTEL, AND HUNTED AS ANIMALS; STILL WE ARE BRANDED FUGITIVE CRIMINALS,

AND WHEN THE UNLUCKY ONES HAVE RUN UNTIL THEY CAN RUN NO MORE, WHEN THEY HAVE FOUGHT TO THE DYING EMBERS OF THEIR BEING, THEY CAN BUT WHISPER THOSE WORDS ‘FREEDOM OR DEATH!’ – AS A TERRIBLE REMINDER OF OUR STILL-BORN DREAM.”

WHEN IT IS NOTHING BUT THE LASH OF OPPRESSION WHICH WE FLEE! SOME ESCAPE TO TASTE FREEDOM IN DISTANT CANADA; OTHERS ARE NOT SO LUCKY.
I MYSELF HAVE BEEN A SLAVE. I HAVE BORNE ON MY BACK THE DEEP SEARS OF INIQUITY; I HAVE SNATCHED FOOD FROM THE MOUTHS OF MY FAMISHED CHILDREN TO INDULGE ANOTHER’S GLUTTONY; I HAVE SWUNG THE SCYTHE IN THE HEAT OF THE SUN, AS ANOTHER GREW RICH FROM THE FRUITS OF MY LABOUR..."
“BUT TODAY I STAND AMONG YOU AS A WOMAN WHO HAS BROKEN HER YOKE OF BONDAGE. TODAY I STAND TALL WITHIN, FULL OF THE SPIRIT OF FREEDOM, HOLDING THE FIRE OF A PEOPLE DEMANDING JUSTICE.

CALL ME, THEN, THE SOJOURNER, FOR I SHALL TREAD AMONG YOU UNTIL THAT YEAR OF JUBILEE WHEN THE CAPTIVES ARE SET FREE, WHEN EVERY VALLEY SHALL BE EXALTED, AND THE CROOKED SET STRAIGHT.”
The water’s troubled, the war begun...
From New York to Rhode Island, from Massachusetts to Connecticut, from Ohio to Michigan, the Sojourner begins to traverse the land, speaking truth to all those who had ears to listen.

The strength of her words and the power of her testimony move many - black and white, rich and poor, men and women - to join the struggle for abolition, and women's rights.
WITH THE INVENTION OF THE DAGUERREOTYPE IN 1839 AND THE SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENT OF PHOTOGRAPHY, AFRICAN AMERICANS HAD BEGUN TO USE IMAGES TO DOCUMENT THEMSELVES AND THEIR EXPERIENCES.

HOW HARD IT IS FOR AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAN TO HAVE HIS VOICE HEARD AND RESPECTED; SO JUST IMAGINE WHAT IT’S LIKE FOR US AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN!
OH, WHAT STIRRING MEMORIES I HOLD OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN SPEAKERS! BUT SO OFTEN OUR ELOQUENT VOICES ARE IGNORED OR SILENCED, OUR HISTORIC EXPERIENCES FORGOTTEN.

MAYBE IF WE COULD HARNES THE SHADOW OF PHOTOGRAPHY TO SUPPORT THE SUBSTANCE OF OUR WORDS...
SO THE SOJOURNER BEGINS TO POSE FOR PHOTOGRAPHS....
AND WITH THE RAPID IMPROVEMENT IN THE COUNTRY’S COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPORT SERVICES, WHICH ALLOWS PHOTOGRAPHS AND INFORMATION TO CIRCULATE QUICKER AND FURTHER, THE NAME AND REPUTATION OF THE SOJOURNER BEGIN TO OUTFUN HER LEGS...

GET YOUR PHOTOS OF THE SOJOURNER HERE. ONLY $2 THE DOZEN!
UNTIL THEY BECOME THE STUFF OF LEGEND!

MY FRIENDS, I HAVE COME HERE OUT OF CURIOSITY FOR WHAT I AM GOING TO SAY.

WELL, I HAD NEVER HEARD OF YOU BEFORE YOU WERE PRESIDENT.

AH, BUT I HAD HEARD OF YOU MANY TIMES BEFORE THAT.

IS THE 15TH AMENDMENT THEN MEANINGLESS?
The City of Washington, the nation’s capital. It had quickly become clear that slavery’s fate would be determined by the war’s outcome. Tens of thousands of African-American men and women had rallied to the Union side, hopeful of fulfilling the long-awaited promise of a new dawn. And now, towards the end of the terrible conflict, the Sojourner has come to witness the new dawn for herself...
But as so often in the past, great legal promise is haunted by a grim reality.

But this cannot be! Must our basic rights always be sacrificed? Especially as some of these rights are at last to be enshrined in the law of this nation!
ON THE BATTLEFRONT, WE WERE NOT GIVEN THE SAME SUPPLIES, HOUSING OR MEDICAL TREATMENT, JUST BECAUSE OF THE COLOR OF OUR SKIN. TYPHOID, MALARIA, DYSENTERY AND PNEUMONIA BECAME OUR MOST PITILESS ASSASSINS.

I AM AFRAID THAT THINGS MIGHT ACTUALLY GET WORSE, EVEN WITH THE UNION VICTORY. WHAT GOOD ARE NEW LAWS IF COURTS ACROSS THESE LANDS ARE DETERMINED TO DEFEND THE OLD ORDER?

AYE. AND WITH THE WAR ENDING, WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THOSE OF OUR SURVIVING SONS AND DAUGHTERS WHO RISKED THEIR LIVES?
Laws mean little to us without activism. We know that now, but they do provide us with something — not enough, by any means — but something all the same, to hold to.

We must continue to insist on our rights. Wherever and whenever they try to introduce separate and unequal facilities according to skin color, we must resist...
THE NEXT DAY...
OUR STREETCAR COMPANY HAS PROVIDED COMFORTABLE SEATING FOR YOU BLACK FOLK, FOR THE GOOD OF EVERYONE. VACATE THIS CARRIAGE AT ONCE, OR I WILL HAVE TO THROW YOU OFF.

FOR THE GOOD OF EVERYONE, YOU SAY? WHAT DOES IT PROFIT ME TO RIDE IN WIND AND RAIN BY THE HORSE’S BACKSIDE, IF I LOSE MY HEALTH IN THE PROCESS?
WHAT? DOES YOUR TONGUE NO LONGER WAG? HAVE YOU NO RESPONSE BUT AGGRESSION? BUT I SHALL RIDE! MARK MY WORDS: I SHALL RIDE!
I demand redress. Beneath that slogan 'separate but equal' festersthe sinister truth of our American democracy, the putrid shame of our American ideals, the tenacious hypocrisy of our American justice system.

Am I not a citizen of this land? Do I not suffer as you suffer, or laugh as you laugh? Why, then, these divisions among us? I demand redress.
But despite Sojourner's small triumph, the run of segregation, legally enforced or not, cannot be slowed. And across the country, particularly in the Deep South, African-American men, women and children are subjected to decades of discrimination, deprivation, and terror.
Almost one hundred years after the nation-wide fight of Sojourner Truth and other heroic individuals and groups against segregation on public transport, Rosa Parks’s refusal to vacate her bus-seat for a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama, triggered a huge struggle by African Americans against racial segregation. In 1964, after centuries of struggle, the Civil Rights Act was passed, which sought to end legal segregation once and for all. Even still, the struggle for greater justice continues today...
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Sojourner Truth
Sojourner Truth (c.1797–1883) was a leading activist, speaker and teacher at the forefront of the African-American struggle for civil rights. Resolutely non-sectarian, she acted as a bridge between issues such as women’s rights, abolition, and religious freedom. Her astute exploitation of her reputation, through photography and print, helped her to become one of the most well-known orators of the nineteenth century.

Women in African History
Through various pedagogical resources and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), UNESCO seeks to highlight the legacy of a selection of key women figures of African history and its diaspora. This project demonstrates that African women have always distinguished themselves in the history of their continent in areas as diverse as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), the defense of women’s rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

This list of 20 women represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

For additional resources, please visit the website www.unesco.org/womeninafrica