

Politics in a Box: Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, 1831-1833

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In 1831, a group of African American women in Philadelphia formed the “Female Literary Association,” believing that they had a duty to develop their God-given intellectual powers. The group met weekly, in sessions marked by the sharing of their own writing. They put their offerings in “the box,” and read the pieces at later meetings. These women commented on the social and political issues of the day. Some of their articles were published in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* by William Lloyd Garrison. He visited the group while in Philadelphia in 1831, a circumstance which makes examination of the group possible.

One of the association’s leaders was Sarah Mapps Douglass, an educator, activist, and prolific writer whose thoughts were often published in *The Liberator*. Through her writing and exchanges among the FLA’s members also published in the abolitionist newspaper, the depth of these women’s dialogue about the political issues facing African Americans during the 1830s is revealed. Douglass’s own public voice was established during these critical years, in her writing and activism.

Sarah Mapps Douglass was born in Philadelphia, in 1806, into a prominent family. Compared to the living situations of many African Americans in those decades, she was apparently raised in relatively comfortable circumstances. Her mother Grace, a businesswoman and teacher, with whom Sarah was active in the anti-slavery movement, was a daughter of Cyrus Bustill. Sarah’s father Robert worked as a hairdresser, and was also active in community affairs. Sarah Douglass began teaching in the 1820s in Philadelphia, probably in a school created by African American community leaders. She taught briefly in the “African” schools in New York City before establishing her own school for African American girls back in Philadelphia. This school was the significant teaching commitment of her middle years. Sarah Douglass continued as a school teacher for over fifty years, until her retirement in 1877 from the Institute for Colored Youth. Her successful proposal to move her school to the Institute in 1853 resulted in the creation of its girls’ preparatory department, which she led for the next 23 years.

Douglass was also consistently engaged in the formation of literary and study groups. The establishment of the Female Literary Association in 1831 reflected her specific intentions to create study and growth opportunities for adult women. Sarah played a key role in the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery

Society from the early years of the group's existence. Through her work in the anti-slavery movement, including her presence at the 1837, 1838, and 1839 national women's anti-slavery conventions, Douglass came to know and correspond with a number of abolitionists. She became close friends with prominent activists Sarah and Angelina Grimké. Sarah Douglass and her mother held national abolitionist leadership positions, although working with white women often brought moments of discomfort. Struggling against discrimination in all areas of her life, Sarah also took part in efforts to expose prejudice among the Quakers, whose faith she and her mother espoused. In spite of their public courage on slavery issues, the Quakers in Philadelphia still enforced separate seating and failed to include African Americans among their membership, a situation that hurt and angered Sarah Douglass.

During the last thirty years of her life, Douglass studied medicine. In 1852, she became the first African American woman to attend the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania. Courses of lectures there and at the short-lived Penn Medical University led Sarah into the work of promoting women's health. She established a reputation as a teacher of physiology and hygiene. Among African American women, Sarah used imported "manikins" to teach women about their own bodies and to promote their health. She was also known for her public lectures on anatomy and physiology, presented to mixed audiences of women and men. Sarah Douglass died in 1882.¹

When Sarah Douglass helped to create the Female Literary Association in 1831, she was a 25-year-old teacher, on the verge of a particularly active time in her public life. Sarah's emerging anti-slavery commitment was expressed in an address to a "Mental Feast" and published in the *Liberator* in July 1832. This event may have been a meeting of the Literary Association, though it is not identified as such in the *Liberator*. After the women had gathered, Sarah read the address she had prepared for the occasion. A scripture reading, silence, and prayer followed, after which several of the women read "affecting slave tales, calculated to bring forcibly into view the deplorable situation of our fellow-creatures at the south—both the oppressor and oppressed." A hymn and simple refreshments concluded the evening.²

There is evidence that Sarah Douglass helped to shape the occasion. The unnamed person who reported on the event for the *Liberator* begins by crediting Simeon Jocelyn, a white abolitionist from New Haven, with having planted the idea for these Mental Feasts in the Philadelphia community. Jocelyn promoted meetings at which women would engage in "moral and religious meditation, conversation, reading and speaking, sympathising [sic] over the fate of the unhappy slaves, improving their own minds, &c. &c.; and, in order to make the meeting truly a Mental Feast and unburthensome to the entertainer, that the visitors should receive the simplest fare."³ It would not be unusual in this era for a group of women to credit a man with the idea of their gathering.

In fact, however, Sarah Douglass's address on this occasion contained some strong language about the purpose and shape of the event. It suggests that she was not accidentally the first to address this kind of gathering, and that she had in fact organized it.

What Jocelyn suggested, Sarah had her own words to describe the purpose of the meeting.

How important is the occasion for which we have assembled ourselves together this evening, to hold a feast, to feed our never-dying minds, to excite each other to deeds of mercy, words of peace; to stir up in the bosom of each, gratitude to God for his increasing goodness, and feeling of deep sympathy for our brethren and sisters, who are in this land of christian light and liberty held in bondage the most cruel and degrading - to make their cause our own!⁴

Concluding her comments, she also recommended with some authority the agenda for the rest of the session, suggesting that she had organized the event.

In conclusion, I would respectfully recommend that our mental feast should commence by reading a portion of the Holy Scriptures. A pause should succeed the reading for supplication. It is my wish that the reading and conversation should be altogether directed to the subject of slavery. The refreshment which may be offered to you for the body, will be of the most simple kind, that you may feel for those who have nothing to refresh body or mind.⁵

In this public address Sarah presented a dramatic story of her emerging activism in the anti-slavery movement, a commitment which echoes through her writings for the Literary Association. She cited an unnamed English writer, who suggested that "We must feel deeply before we can act rightly." This was her experience, she reported. Until the threat of the "oppressor" touched her life, she had not really felt the plight of the slave or identified with the slave's struggles.

One short year ago, how different were my feelings on the subject of slavery! It is true, the wail of the captive sometimes came to my ear in the midst of my happiness, and caused my heart to bleed for his wrongs; but, alas! the impression was as evanescent as the early cloud and morning dew. I had formed a little world of my own, and cared not to move beyond its precincts. But how was the scene changed when I beheld the oppressor lurking on the border of my own peaceful home! I saw his iron hand stretched forth to seize me as his prey, and the

cause of the slave became my own. I started up, and with one mighty effort threw from me the lethargy which had covered me as a mantle for years; and determined, by the help of the Almighty, to use every exertion in my power to elevate the character of my wronged and neglected race.⁶

It seems unlikely, given her family's activism, that Sarah had been as insulated from slavery and as apathetic about the cause as she suggests in this passage. But with this remarkable drama, she spoke for well-to-do African Americans of this period, who were shaken from whatever security they might have enjoyed in Philadelphia and other northern cities. There is an honesty in this passage, in which she admits that her feelings about the slaves had not been very profound before the "iron hand" had threatened her in a dramatic way.

What was the "iron hand" which according to Sarah had inspired a new level of activism? In fact, the years of 1831-1832, when Sarah Douglass underwent this great change of heart, was a period of anti-slavery turmoil and a pro-slavery backlash caused both by slave revolts and the increasing stridency of Northern abolitionism. The key event was certainly the slave revolt led in Virginia by Nat Turner, in August of 1831. Though it was a brief and tragic slave rebellion, for many whites in the North and the South, the image of African Americans taking up arms was the stuff of nightmares.⁷

Reactions to Turner were swift. Fearful of increasing slave violence, and suspicious of instigation by northern African Americans, renewed attempts were made to restrict their movement across state borders, and to regulate the lives of free African Americans. In Pennsylvania, legislative proposals sought to restrict African American immigration into the Commonwealth, reinforce fugitive slave laws, and require the registration of all African Americans living in the state. On December 17, 1831, just one month after Nat Turner's execution, a motion was submitted to the Pennsylvania legislature by a Philadelphia county representative, requesting judiciary committee inquiry into the expediency of a law to bar free African Americans from entering the state. According to the motion, Virginia and Maryland were expected to pass laws throwing out as many as 123,000 free African Americans. The author feared that the surrounding states would be "overrun by an influx of [an] ignorant, indolent, and depraved population, most dangerous to the peace, rights, and liberties of the citizens [of Pennsylvania]...". The question was, could they legally be kept out?⁸

This effort to keep African Americans from moving to Pennsylvania was not the first in the state's history. Beginning in 1805, the legislature debated bills to prevent African American immigration into the state, to tax African Americans for the support of indigent members of their community, and to

require them to carry some sort of certificate of residence. African Americans, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and the Society of Friends opposed these efforts, and they met with no success. Legislation proposed in 1813, which included provisions to require African Americans to carry residency certificates, would have sold into slavery African Americans convicted of crimes. James Forten and other community leaders forcefully objected. In spite of great support from white Philadelphians who claimed that African Americans in the city were a nuisance, the bill was defeated.⁹

Efforts to pass restrictive legislation continued, unsuccessfully. As a prelude to the renewed efforts in 1831 and 1832, Pennsylvania had in fact passed legislation in 1820 and 1826 which responded to the threat of slave-catchers. They were capturing even free African Americans, especially in the streets of Philadelphia. The 1820 law increased penalties for kidnappers. In 1826 these provisions were largely upheld, though the legislature stopped short of requiring jury trials for fugitive slaves who claimed to be free. These laws, fulfilling the provisions of the 1780 Gradual Abolition Act, set Pennsylvania at odds with the 1793 Federal Fugitive Slave Law. Federal legislation gave slave owners or their agents the right to enter free states, seizing persons alleged to be slaves, with only the consent of a local magistrate. Neither investigation nor the testimony of the alleged slave was allowed in the process.¹⁰

Nevertheless, after the Turner revolt, the mood in Pennsylvania was generally supportive of exclusion laws. Pennsylvania House of Representatives Bill 446, "a bill to prohibit the emigration of negroes and mulattoes in this commonwealth," was considered in committees of the legislature for the 1831/32 and 1832/33 terms, but never made its way out of committee. In the second reading of the bill on January 9, 1832, a call was made to repeal the fugitive slave laws of 1820 and 1826, and to put the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 into full effect in the state. The legislature was inundated with memorials and communications, most of them supportive of the proposed legislation.¹¹

In the Philadelphia African American community, a meeting was organized in January of 1832, by James Forten and others, to produce a memorial to the legislature against its consideration of the legislation. The memorialists appealed to Pennsylvania's own constitution, in which there was no mention of color, as basic rights were enunciated for its citizens. They rejected suggestions that African Americans in the North were involved in "promoting servile insurrections," and proclaimed their allegiance to the state. Responding to assumptions that free African Americans were likely to be poor and a burden in society, they attached an appendix which answered those charges with lists of institutions and positive accomplishments of Philadelphia's African American community. On behalf of fugitives, they appealed for the right of a trial, before a person would be handed over to a slave catcher.¹²

The legislative debate over the bill continued. In March 1832, House Bill 446 was read in its completed form. It required any African American entering the state to post a \$500 bond toward future pauperism, provided for the arrest of anyone not complying with the previous provision, and included penalties for employers hiring violators. The most obnoxious section of the bill to African American residents was its fourth. It required local assessors to perform a census of "all negro and mulatto persons" residing in their area, with lists of such residents provided to Aldermen, Justices of the Peace, and Clerks of the Courts. Any African American moving within the state would have to provide a certificate of residence, to be checked against those lists, or he/she would be treated as a fugitive under the first provisions of the bill.¹³

Another group of African American leaders from the county of Philadelphia published this legislation, with their lengthy and detailed objections, appealing again to the state's own constitutional history and legal traditions. They could not believe that they would be treated in this way:

They [the memorialists] are, many of them, individuals, who have struggled long and anxiously with public prejudice, who have at least tried to lead lives of industry and morality; and who, looking emulously to the level on which the practice of those virtues will place any man, white or black, are to be told, if such a bill as is contemplated, passes, that all this has been a fruitless effort; - and however anxiously and honestly they many have laboured to raise themselves, on the scale of social being, it has been in vain. . .¹⁴

One wonders if the proposed Pennsylvania legislation, with its threats to free African Americans, was indeed the "iron hand" that moved Sarah out of her apathy. Was there such hostility in the city and nation that she believed the bill would pass (it did not), requiring her and others to carry passes, and face arrest if they couldn't produce them? Had she or someone close to her actually been threatened in the street, abducted by some would-be slave catcher? Though there are no reports that she or family members were directly attacked by slave-catchers, she was frightened by their vulnerability in Philadelphia's climate of backlash after slave insurrections were a reality. Out of those personal fears, she took up the cause of the slave in the bleak days of 1832.

Sarah had in fact already acted to gather women together for their improvement and increased engagement with the dangers at hand. The Female Literary Association came to life at a meeting on September 20, 1831. In their constitution, these women made clear the intimate connection Sarah and the others saw between their own intellectual growth and the social and political well being of all African Americans.

Conscious that among the various pursuits that have engaged the attention of mankind in the different eras of the world, none have ever been considered by persons of judgment and penetration, as superior to the cultivation of the intellectual powers, bestowed upon us by the God of nature; it therefore becomes a duty incumbent upon us as women, as daughters of a despised race, to use our utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding, to cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping, that by so doing, we may in a great measure, break down the strong barrier of prejudice, and raise ourselves to an equality with those of our fellow beings, who differ from us in complexion, but who are with ourselves, children of one Eternal Parent, and by his immutable law, we are entitled to the same rights and privileges. . .¹⁵

The goal of the Female Literary Association was self-improvement: education to disprove prejudice and to challenge white belief in the intellectual inferiority of African Americans. But this statement goes quite beyond that understanding of intellectual growth as some sort of compensatory activity for African Americans to reach the “level” of whites. The “cultivation of intellectual powers” is the greatest human pursuit, because God bestowed those powers and talents. These women felt that as women, as African Americans, they had a special duty to use those talents, in part to break down the prejudices of whites and gain equality. Ultimately, however, the equality they sought, the “rights and privileges” they worked for, were theirs already by the “immutable law” of the “Eternal Parent,” whose children included members of the “despised race” as well as those “fellow beings different in complexion.” In these words there is strength and defiance, and an understanding that their self-development was a part of this claim on divinely-given rights.¹⁶

The women in this group understood that their education in the broadest sense was at the same time advancement of the race. Purposes for schools and organizations created in the African American community included, from the earliest days, educating girls and women. In the face of racial hostility, both females and males were needed to demonstrate “intelligence, morality, ingenuity,” and to develop skills for survival. There was considerable support for girls’ schooling and for self-improvement groups such as literary societies. Whatever the public debate about women’s education and women’s intellectual abilities in this era, African American girls and women found great support for their education. Just as white girls and women were quietly gaining increased access to schools, African American girls and women were also part of that societal shift to extend education in various settings to women. They enjoyed an extra level of support in a community where women’s gains were seen as vital to the good of all.¹⁷

In their formation of the Female Literary Association, these women reflected a growing general movement among African Americans (as well as men and women in various other racial and ethnic communities). The 1830s saw a remarkable growth in the number of educational settings for adults: literary associations, lyceums, library associations, reading groups, and debating societies. Among African Americans, this was particularly true in large communities such as Philadelphia, as Dorothy Porter and other scholars have long noted.¹⁸ Like the women in Sarah's group, African American men saw the importance of their self-improvement and education for disproving hostile theories about African Americans. Men and women found in these groups the space to discuss matters of importance, to have a sense of community and mutual support, and to experience a recognition of their abilities. They created libraries, supported schools, encouraged writing, and often sponsored the publication of members' productions. The goals went beyond "lifting" each other to the "level" of whites, or even disproving hostile stereotypes. A young man, John Bowers, proclaimed to the Female Literary Association at its anniversary celebration in 1834 that through the work of these groups, African Americans were "increasing in knowledge which is power." These were radical words, but reflected a broad community understanding of the importance of education and self-development.¹⁹

To carry out its purposes, the Female Literary Association met every week for "recitation and reading." From the beginning the approximately twenty members wrote anonymous pieces which were put in a box and later read. They bought books, and materials on current issues (such as Garrison's "Thoughts on Colonization"). Garrison learned of the group shortly after its inception. Sarah Douglass sent the constitution to the *Liberator* for publication. When the group apparently missed the December 3, 1831, issue of the paper, they thought that their submission had not been published. Sarah Douglass wrote to Garrison in February, 1832, demanding to know why it had not appeared. Sensitive to some possible prejudice, Sarah wanted to know if someone had "forbid" its publication. "As no one except myself had any right to forbid it, we would esteem it a favour if you would have the kindness to answer this question." She went on to explain that the group wanted it published to encourage women in other cities to found similar associations.²⁰

Sarah's strong words evoked a quick response from Garrison. His letter of March 5 pointed out that the Constitution had indeed been published in the newspaper. In the rest of a rather lengthy communication, Garrison spoke appreciatively of the Association, and the role of women in the struggle against slavery. His view of women's role in that work and in the "elevation of your race" certainly fit within the prevailing stereotypes of the age. Women's self-improvement and moral, intellectual growth were hailed as having significant influence on men of all ages. Believing that women had "minds capable of

wondrous enlargement, made never to expire, fearfully responsible, majestically great," Garrison followed what was certainly a widespread view of the sphere and impact of women who were organizing around the issues of the day.

There is not a glance of your eye, not a tone of your voice,—however seemingly the look of remonstrance or entreaty be disregarded, or the word of admonition or advice be slighted,—but has a direct connexion with the results of masculine actions and pursuits. . . . Neither let any among you circumscribe her usefulness by deeming herself irresponsible or insignificant. I would not encourage vanity, but self respect; nor excite complacency, but action. To do good, to destroy prejudice, to lift up the helpless, to restore the wandering, in one word to fulfill the design of her creation, this, this must animate her at all times.²¹

Though these words were clearly a message to the entire association, this letter reflects Garrison's friendship with the Douglass family. Sarah's sharp words and Garrison's quick response constituted an interchange between friends. Garrison also inquired about her brother Robert's art career, sent greetings to her parents, and reported that he hoped to see her in June of that year at the annual Convention (the National Colored Convention). He was truly worried at having offended her. Aware of her writing, Garrison reminded Sarah that the *Liberator* now had a "Ladies ' Department." Consistent with his assumptions regarding the place of women in the movement, he offered this separate vehicle for Sarah's writing. He hoped she would "occupy it as often as possible with your productions, and get others of your Society to do the same." At the end of this urgent letter to a friend, Garrison closed "with singular respect for your mind and character."²²

Sarah and her family saw Garrison again in June, 1832, when he came to Philadelphia for the national convention. He addressed the Female Literary Association during the visit. Garrison repeated his support for the education and self-improvement of women, particularly in light of the "influence" of women on young minds. Later, he reported his visit in the *Liberator*, where he published a series of writings from the group.²³

Analysis of the writings of the Female Literary Association is complicated by the task of matching pseudonyms with group members. One of the few clear identifications that can be made is the writing of Sarah Forten, community leader James Forten's daughter. In a February 23, 1831, letter to William Garrison, Forten indicated that Sarah's work was signed "A," "Ada," or "Magawisca."²⁴ Sarah Douglass's most frequent pseudonym was "Zillah." The name "Zillah" (the Hebrew word means "shadow") comes from Genesis 4: 19, 22-23, where Zillah appears as the wife of Lamech. Lamech was a descendant of Cain, the ostracized son of Adam.²⁵

This identification is made possible by comparing family records with “Zillah’s” August 18, 1832, column in the *Liberator*. It offers an inspiring tale of an African American girl, “Elizabeth,” and her tragic experiences in an integrated school. In Zillah’s story, Elizabeth was the oldest of six children, four boys and two girls. The youngest was “Willie,” a difficult child only Elizabeth was able to control. From the time she was eighteen months old, Elizabeth suffered with a “diseased hip joint.” When she was ten, her parent sent her to the neighborhood school, where she received the “approbation” of her “instructress.” But, Zillah reports, the other children were unkind, and unhappy that she had reached the head of the class. They called her “negro,” and complained to their parents that “a negro stood above them.” The teacher, “much as she loved her, was obliged to let her go.” After this experience, Elizabeth “had no opportunity of going to school; but her kind mother supplied the place of her teacher, and she learned to read and sew extremely well.”²⁶

The rest of this piece evoked Elizabeth’s sterling character, and her courage facing death at the age of fourteen. Young white readers were challenged not to behave as Elizabeth’s classmates did, and to respect her character in spite of her “complexion.” The identification of the children in the story of “Elizabeth” corresponds perfectly with Sarah Douglass’s family, as reported in family records. Robert and Grace Douglass had six children. They included Elizabeth D., Sarah Mapps, Robert Jr., James Forten, Charles F. and William Penn Douglass. According to family records, Sarah’s oldest sister Elizabeth died in 1819, at the age of fourteen. Her youngest brother was William, who would also die at a young age. This article described a disturbing piece of the family’s experience.²⁷

This story also became one piece of a litany of scarring incidents related to the Douglass family’s treatment by whites in public places. Sarah and her family clearly remembered these occasions as powerful, shaping indictments of white prejudice. They hoped that racists could be stung by the truth of their feelings in these moments. Sarah, or “Zillah,” made this plain in her story of Elizabeth’s painful expulsion from the neighborhood school.

O, children, did you know the bitterness of having the finger of scorn pointed at you wherever you appear, at school, in the streets, and even in the Lord’s house; could you feel for one moment the anguish of being despised merely for your complexion, surely you would throw this unholy prejudice from you with disdain.²⁸

Though she generally wrote “Zillah,” Sarah may also have used the name “Sophanisba.” She was strongly identified with slave women, unflinchingly opposed to the American Colonization Society, and expressed a deep hurt over white prejudice, as did the other anonymous women who wrote for the *Liberator* and the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*.²⁹

With the initiation of a “Ladies Department” in early 1832, the *Liberator* consistently published Sarah’s writing, and works by other members of the Female Literary Association. One of Zillah’s early appearances in the *Liberator* occurred in the June 30, 1832, issue, in a selection entitled “To a Friend.” In a piece of the dialogue from the Literary Association, introduced with Garrison’s report on his visit to the group, Zillah responded to the bill pending in the Pennsylvania legislature, which would have imposed a series of restrictions on the immigration of African Americans into the state and required resident African Americans to be registered. “You ask me,” Sarah/Zillah began, “if I do not despair on account of the Bill now before our Legislature? I am cast down but not in despair.” In her claim that she did not despair over this bill, Zillah/Sarah appealed to the story of a Quaker martyr, and hoped that “a double portion of her humility and fortitude may be ours.” Clearly, this piece was about the pain caused by the Legislature’s discussions, a pain that took a martyr’s courage to face. But Zillah went on with a vision of a changed society, grounded in her faith in the God who “is on our side.” Her faith, declared with an almost angry fervor, allowed her to see past the actions of whites to a different day, to a transformed, peaceful society. The creation of the Female Literary Association, her writing, and increasing community leadership were Sarah Douglass’s response to this “iron hand,” and the means by which she sought to embody this transformative faith.³⁰

Sarah’s voice was only one in the FLA’s political conversation. During July and August, 1832, the *Liberator* printed a series of articles from the “box” of the Literary Association which responded to an article appearing in the paper in January. On January 28, “A Colored Female of Philadelphia” wrote a letter to Garrison about “Emigration to Mexico,” in which she rejected calls for colonization in Africa (and even Canada, if it meant separate communities) but proposed Mexico as a good place to reestablish African American life. Clearly, the prospect of going to a country mostly “colored” in population was an important part of this woman’s enthusiasm.

The government of these United States is not the only one in this hemisphere that offers equal rights to men; but there are others, under whose protection we may safely reside, where it is no disgrace to wear a sable complexion, and where our rights will not be continually trampled upon, on that account. . . . [I] believe that the time has arrived, when we ought to manifest that spirit of independence which shines so conspicuously in the character of Europeans, by leaving the land of oppression, and emigrating where we may be received and treated as brothers; where our worth will be felt and acknowledged; and where we may acquire education, wealth, and respectability . . . [W]here is that country to which we may remove, and thus become

free and equal? I believe that country to be Mexico. . . . I would not wish to be thought pleading the cause of colonization, for no one detests it more than I do. I would not be taken to Africa, were the Society to make me 'queen of the country' . . . I am informed that the population of Mexico is eight millions of colored, and one million of whites; and by the rapid growth of amalgamation amongst them, there is every probability that it will ere long become one entire colored nation.³¹

Other members of the Literary Association sharply disagreed with this woman's assertions. On July 21, "Zillah" rejected emigration to "Hayti" or Mexico as unsafe and too risky. She asserted that nearly all people, even African Americans, were happier in America than anywhere else. Most importantly, this country "is our home," even though it "unkindly strives to throw me from her bosom."³²

In the August *Liberator* more of the debate was published. "Woodby" responded to "Zillah" ("your reply to 'A Colored Female of Philadelphia,' read at our last meeting") by suggesting that she had misunderstood the article on emigration to Mexico. Although "Woodby" also resisted being "obliged to leave this place" through any colonization scheme, the time might come when "the people of these United States should make such compulsory laws" that African Americans would be forced to find a place of refuge. The discussions of the Pennsylvania legislature and the increasingly hostile backlash against slave uprisings echoed through these discussions, making a case for emigration, in the eyes of some of the women.³³

Sarah Douglass, as Zillah, made a sharp response to Woodby's criticism. ("My friend has entirely mistaken the design of the communication placed in the box last week.") Zillah believed that it was God's will that African Americans remain in this country. She spoke approvingly of Garrison as an advocate for the cause. "Cease, then, to think of any other city of refuge." God will deliver on the promise of the kingdom, Zillah asserted, and they ought to trust in that victory as Garrison did. This note in the "box" was a stirring call to stay in the United States and fight for the cause, to claim their home as fulfillment of God's promises. Woodby had urged a re-reading of the original piece on emigration to Mexico, but Zillah rejected any consideration of those ideas.

Believe me, my friend, were I to read it a thousand times, it could not alter feelings and opinions which have entwined themselves round every fibre of my heart, from my childhood: even at that early period, when I heard encomiums lavished upon this favored country, my heart exulted, and I said, 'This is my own, my native land.'³⁴

The writing and dialogue among these women, accomplished through these pieces placed in the “box,” also included powerful calls to these rather privileged women to understand the conditions of slavery and work for its end. In July Zillah/Sarah submitted a piece to the *Liberator* which sought to show the miseries of slave life, and to inspire free women to work for immediate emancipation. In “A Mother’s Love,” Zillah claimed to have spoken with a liberated slave. The woman reported being beaten by her mistress for trying to breastfeed her baby in the middle of a work day. She was also cut on her breast by her mistress for dropping a potato skin. Hearing this story, Zillah reported, “My countenance expressed so much horror at this account, that I believe the poor woman thought I doubted her veracity. Baring her aged bosom, ‘Look,’ said she, ‘my child, here is the scar’—and I looked and wept that woman should have so far forgot her gentle nature.” It’s a bit unclear who Sarah thought had forgotten her nature—the mistress who assaulted the slave, or the old woman who bared her breast. Nevertheless, this article is a powerful evocation of the violence in slave life, and a call to free African American and white women to identify with women in captivity.³⁵

The published work of Sarah Douglass and other members of the Philadelphia Female Literary Association reflects the engagement of the group’s members with issues of slavery and their own status as African American women. Any attempt to reduce this kind of group to a strict parallel with similar groups among white women misses this crucial, self-conscious political agenda. The formation of literary, debating, reading, and library groups among African American women and men increased in the 1830s, and paralleled similar developments among whites. Reflecting and participating in a general societal move to organize, in the name of sharing literature, study, and entertainment, groups such as the Female Literary Association also provided a distinctive educational (and political) setting for African American women such as Sarah Douglass. The FLA formed just as radical anti-slavery organizations were emerging, and may be seen as an example of the leadership African American women exercised in that movement.³⁶

Like organizations among white women, the Female Literary Association was a significant educational experience for its members, giving them a safe setting in which they could discuss current issues and share their thoughts. Ellen Lagemann uses the notion of “exchange” to describe the impact women may have on each other in such settings, passing “Knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs” back and forth via personal relationships and dialogue.³⁷ Studies of later women’s organizations in urban settings have noted the ways these groups promoted administrative skills, and brought privileged women in contact with issues and realities that otherwise might have been distant from their lives.³⁸

Through personal sharing, guest speakers (like Garrison), and specific reflections on current issues, Sarah Douglass (and other African American women) pushed beyond somewhat comfortable circumstances. They exchanged knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and beliefs, and prepared for an increasingly public role in abolition and community circles. Sarah gained a public voice, which she would use in national abolitionist organizing and in her own teaching career. It is likely that the other unnamed women in the group were among those who also became active in anti-slavery, free produce, and other political organizations. The quality of their dialogue and the education they provided for each other on the critical issues supported their entry into public arenas of social and political change.

Notes

1. Marie J. Lindhorst, "Sarah Mapps Douglass: The Emergence of an African American Educator/Activist in 19th Century Philadelphia" (Ph.D. diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 1995).
2. *Liberator*, July 21, 1832.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.* The portion of Scripture read that evening was *Isaiah*, Chapter 54, a prophetic promise of abundance and peace: "In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; . . . No weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment" (NRSV).
6. *Liberator*, July 21, 1832.
7. For the story of Nat Turner linked to the explosive writings of Boston radical David Walker, see Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1981), 75-100.
8. Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 132. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 56 (1831-32), 48.
9. Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 180-181*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Winch, 18-20.
10. Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation and Its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 198, 200-201.
11. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 56 (1831-32) and 57 (1832-33).
12. "To the Honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: The Memorial of the People of Color of the City of Philadelphia and its Vicinity," *Liberator*, April 14, 1832. "Appendix to the Memorial from the People of Color to the Legislature of Pennsylvania," *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania*, June 1832.
13. The Text of the bill, H.R. 446, "a bill to prohibit the emigration [sic] of negroes and mulattoes, in this commonwealth," is included in the memorial of African Americans in the county of Philadelphia, "To the Honourable the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: The Memorial of the Subscribers, Free People of Colour, Residing in the County of Philadelphia," (n.p., n.d.). I am grateful to Julie Winch for providing a copy of this memorial from the Cornell University Library.
14. *Ibid.*, 10-12.
15. *Liberator*, December 3, 1831.
16. *Ibid.*
17. "To the Females of Color," *Colored American*, Jan. 7, 1837. For an examination of African American women's education and its changing significance later in the century, see Linda M. Perkins, "Black Women and the Philosophy of 'Race Uplift' Prior to Emancipation" (Cambridge, MA: Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute, 1980), ERIC, ED 221 444; Linda M. Perkins, "Black Feminism and 'Race Uplift,' 1890-1900" (Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute, 1981), ERIC, ED 221 445; and Linda M. Perkins, "The Impact of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' on the Education of Black Women," *Journal of Social Issues* 39 (Fall 1983): 17-28.
18. Dorothy B. Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846," *Journal of Negro Education* 5 (1936), describes many of these groups, which were primarily single sex. Leonard Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), looked at organizations in several African American communities. See also Julie Winch, "'You Have Talents - Only Cultivate Them' Philadelphia's Black Female Literary Societies and the Abolitionist Crusade," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 101-118, for an extensive discussion of literary groups, their published work, and their connection to the political issues of the day.
19. *Liberator*, November 29, 1834.
20. *Liberator*, December 3, 1831, June 30, 1832. Sarah M. Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, February 29, 1832, *Black Abolitionist Papers, 1830-1865* (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980).
21. The number of women in the FLA (twenty) is given in: Pennsylvania Abolition Society, *Facts on Beneficial Societies and Schools for Negroes, 1823-1838*. (n.p., 1838).
21. William Lloyd Garrison to Sarah M.

Douglass, March 5, 1832, Walter M. Merrill, ed., *I Will Be Heard: The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1971), 143-145.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Liberator*, June 9, 1832 and June 30, 1832.

24. James Forten to William Lloyd Garrison, February 23, 1831, cited in Janice Sumler-Lewis, "The Forten-Purvis Women of Philadelphia and the American Anti-Slavery Crusade," *Journal of Negro History* 66 [Winter 1981-82], 288).

25. *Liberator*, August 18, 1832. This identification of Zillah with Sarah is also made by C. Peter Ripley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol. 3, *The United States, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 118.

26. *Liberator*, August 18, 1832. The Douglass family records are found in the Nathan F. Mossell Papers, University of Pennsylvania Archives, Philadelphia.

27. *Ibid.* Mossell, [Copy of Bustill Family Records], Mossell Papers.

28. *Liberator*, August 18, 1832.

29. In addition to my identification of Sarah Douglass as "Zillah," Dorothy Sterling, ed. *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1984), 111, asserts that Sarah is also "Sophanisba," but in a personal communication with me was unable to establish how or why she came to that conclusion. Though I am also inclined to think that Sarah wrote as "Sophanisba," it is only a guess, according to the themes of those writings. Perhaps the largest volume of work by an African American woman in the *Liberator* and several other papers (during the 1830s) was written under the name of "Ella," a name that also appears in "Sophanisba's" writing. For that reason, I was tempted to establish Ella as Grace Douglass, or even Sarah. Though Julie Winch makes that identification (in the work previously cited), I've uncovered nothing to make that identification with any certainty. If Ella's writings were by one person, she was a writer and poet of significant

sensitivity to the critical issues of the day, and wrote for several decades. All of these writers identified with the slaves, rejected colonization, expressed the pain of white prejudice, and asserted the power of faith in a God of justice.

30. *Liberator*, June 30, 1832.

31. *Liberator*, January 28, 1832.

32. *Liberator*, July 21, 1832.

33. *Liberator*, August 18, 1832.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Liberator*, July 28, 1832.

36. Anne F. Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 45-46. For an examination of the educational and interpersonal dynamics within "parlor" settings, see Joan D. Hedrick, "Parlor Literature: Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Question of 'Great Women Artists,'" *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992): 275-303. Ellen C. Lagemann, "Education as Exchange: A Perspective Derived from Women's History," in *Educating an Urban People: The New York City Experience*, ed. Diane Ravitch and Ronald K. Goodenow (New York: Teachers College Press, 1981), 141-153, provides an important affirmation of the educational impact on women in these organizations. My assertion about the political importance of the FLA for Sarah and other African American women comes in part from my own analysis of their writing. They delved into the most difficult issues of the day facing African Americans. Though they were not explicitly an anti-slavery society, I believe the group's importance ought to be analyzed in that political context.

37. Lagemann, "Education as Exchange," 141.

38. Barbara J. Berg, "The City as School: Female Voluntary Societies, 1800-1860," in *Educating an Urban People: The New York City Experience*, ed. Diane Ravitch (New York: Teachers College Press, 1981). A comprehensive treatment of women's clubs later in the century is found in Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980).