

Sisterhood Solidarity: The Legacy of Sojourner Truth and Frances Titus  
By: Rev. Emily Joye  
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There is no hiding the fact that the national project known as North America included, at its ideological and political foundation, a hierarchy of human value that put white, male, property owning persons at the top. Those of us who don't fit that category have and continue to pay the price in the form of social oppression. There is also no hiding the fact that the original hierarchy structured the lives of those at the top and those at the bottom and those in the middle *differently*. Part of reclaiming our humanity from the inheritance of social oppression is figuring out how our lives have been structured, against whom, and restructuring--materially and ideologically--so we can bring about a world where everyone thrives. This is certainly true when it comes to the social structuring of relations between women of color and white women.

In a film-criticism piece focused on *12 years a slave*, Michaela Angela Davis, activist and author writes: "Black and White American women were doomed from the start, introduced through treacherous, asymmetric, viciously competitive, inhuman maddening circumstances. (...) We were systematically cultured to distrust and envy each other. We were never meant to be sisters."<sup>1</sup> There is a long, long history across racial and gender lines that confirms Davis' words. For every historical moment when a woman of color and a white woman found each other as

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<sup>1</sup> <http://jezebel.com/12-years-a-slave-rage-privilege-black-women-and-whit-1452173238>

allies, there are twenty examples of the opposite. White women have, again and again, come up short in the work of sisterhood and solidarity.

And yet, in Battle Creek, we have an example, of sisterhood forged across race, that stands out as a beautiful exception to this national wretched history. Given the amount and urgency of renewed, contemporary calls for women of all colors, classes, creeds, orientations, body types and geographies to find one another in political struggle, this “close to home” example of sisterhood solidarity could provide spiritual breath to our movements for social justice. If we earnestly ask the question *how can women across color lines forge sisterhood in a society and country that “systematically cultured” us not to?*--perhaps Sojourner Truth and Frances Titus will speak from beyond the grave.

Sojourner Truth and Frances Titus met in 1856 during a Progressive Friends Meeting.<sup>2</sup> Quakerism originally brought them together but a shared passion for justice sealed their bond 10 years later when their collaborative work began. Before the Civil War Sojourner Truth circulated all over the country giving lectures about the necessity of ending slavery as a former enslaved woman. Titus often supported her travels, once providing help with a home loan so Sojourner's family (kids and grandkids) could be together while Truth lectured across state lines. Later after the war Truth and Titus collaborated in trying to help newly freed Black Americans resettle and find work. Truth made every effort to seek out places

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<sup>2</sup> There is absolutely nothing in this piece that can't be found in *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* by Nell Irvin Painter & Heritage Battle Creek Vol 8. I am deeply indebted to the researchers, historians and archivists who have preserved the material presented here. A special shout out goes to the Historical Society of Battle Creek & The Sojourner Truth Institute for the tireless ways they keep Sojourner and Frances' legacies alive today.

for homesteading and employment all over the country, but mostly in Kansas, and the "West". In tight correspondence with Truth, Titus worked locally to make Battle Creek a place where newly freed people could resettle. She also eventually set up a school, in the old city hall building, where newly freed persons could learn basic writing, reading and arithmetic.

During the 1870s Titus worked mostly on Women's Suffrage emerging in Michigan. Frances was called to serve several national organizations hoping to get women the right to vote. In 1874 an amendment to the Michigan constitution was drafted for women to vote thanks to the organizing of Titus and her many allies. It was sorely defeated state-wide but the margin of defeat was lower in Battle Creek than other places.

At that time, Truth was in Kansas trying to implement strategy for the great Exodus when she believed Black people would leave the South in hopes of greater economic opportunity. That migration happened later, after Truth had grown ill due to age, and despite all of her spirit-filled labor, she was not able to see the fruits. Truth and Titus reunited, both with their hearts in their hands, in Battle Creek after this sense of political and social defeat, to find each other anew. They were huge sources of comfort to one another in the midst of what felt like massive grief at the state of cruelty and injustice around the nation and here in Michigan.

Sojourner fell ill at some point later that year and became confined. Frances Titus took that time to edit and rewrite certain parts of Truth's autobiography. Writing and storytelling became an integral part of their bond. Eventually Titus

would bind and print those books and use them to support Sojourner financially. When Sojourner got well again and hit the road to speak around the country, Frances went with her as business manager and personal secretary. Eventually they would re-engage the work of getting food, shelter and jobs to refugees resettling out of the South. Titus used her privilege to influence the affluent in Battle Creek to send resources where Truth organized in the West. But right as their efforts started making real impact, Truth got sick again and returned home. From there out Frances took care of her bodily and correspondence needs.

After Sojourner Truth died in November of 1883 Titus, as a dear, lifelong friend will always do, amped up her loyalty to Truth by raising money for a beautiful, specialized hand-crafted marble tombstone. She then commissioned a special painting of Sojourner to be mounted at Albion College and republished a posthumous edition of Sojourner's autobiography which included a memorial chapter and her favorite song entitled "We are Going Home."

The two were capable of coming together, going apart, and coming back together over and over throughout their adult lives. The three mainstays of their connection were Quaker faith, suffragism and abolitionism. But beyond those most obvious socio-political and institutional commitments lives the truth of love: Truth and Titus found each other again and again because something about the company of the other warranted it. Solidarity in sisterhood isn't just about what political projects we forge together; it's also about the love we kindle in each other's midst. An emotional bond like theirs doesn't happen often. Perhaps because it was so

unlikely back then and continues to be today, we ought to flesh out even more concretely what the legacy of Truth and Titus was all about.

Truth and Titus teach us that friendships can be revolutionary and nurture what's radical in establishing race and gender justice. They show us that true love across difference/s will throw us into political struggle for the sake of liberation. We see, through their lived example, that anti-racism and feminism go together well when there's trust between us, humility within us, and courage to defy convention--and all of that can take years to build through mutual, trustworthy relationships. They cared about education and worked together to make sure those least likely to access formal learning on their own were given support. Finally, their legacy compels us to think strategically about how money flows--that it's right and good for those with privilege to actively put their resources behind leadership of color making just change.

What would it mean for women (and their allies) in Battle Creek to uphold this local legacy of sisterhood solidarity with intentionality? It would certainly require us to regard each other differently than we have been socialized and cultured to do. Maybe in that new regard, by finding each other, we will be "going home" too. After all, that's where they went, with each other, to provide a space for us. May it not have been in vain.