

**WHILE THE WATER IS STIRRING:
SOJOURNER TRUTH AS PROTO-AGONIST IN THE FIGHT FOR (BLACK)
WOMEN’S RIGHTS**

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ABSTRACT

This Essay argues for a greater understanding of Sojourner Truth’s little-discussed role as a proto-agonist (a marginalized, long suffering forerunner as opposed to a protagonist, a highly celebrated central character) in the process that led up to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Though the Nineteenth Amendment failed to deliver on its promise of suffrage for black women immediately after its enactment, black women were, well before the ratification of the Amendment, and for many years after its passage, stalwarts in the fight for the Amendment and for women’s rights more broadly. Women’s rights in general, and black women’s rights in particular, were created and sustained by the work of antebellum activists like Sojourner Truth, a towering figure who was tied to nineteenth-century movements for abolition and women’s suffrage. Sojourner Truth’s advocacy on behalf of women was premised upon a womanist approach to speech and action that centered the experiences of black women in the business of equal rights both in terms of race and gender. Sojourner Truth’s work as a justice-seeking sage with a goal of advancing the legal, political, and economic rights of women in general and black women in particular is a source of inspiration and a model for making contemporary black women protagonists and co-agonists—co-centric figures—in the work that is still much needed at the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment.

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