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Book Review: Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought

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Reviewed by Jennifer Rycenga[2]

"How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles? Until union, knowledge and love begin to flow among us" (Stewart, *Productions*, 16). This bold statement, uniting gender, labor, race, poverty, and solidarity in two sentences, typifies the prescience of the first American-born woman to give a political speech in the United States: Maria Stewart (1803-1879). She flashes across American history like a comet: fleeting but brilliant, incandescently ahead of her contemporaries. The speeches and writings of this young African-American woman in the early 1830s anticipate PanAfricanism and Black intersectional feminism, as well as passionately condemning the division of manual and mental labor. Her emergence in the key early years of immediate abolition of slavery in the United States, during a time of increased Black-white cooperation in the struggle, was fortuitous, but opposition from men who condemned women's public speaking, joined with personal losses and legal injustices, led to her move from Boston to the New York City area in 1834. Aside from the brief window when her writings were published in and by *The Liberator* (1831-1834), most of her life remained in the shadows with but the slimmest fragments and notices available to historians.

Kristin Waters' volume transforms this situation, adding extensive substance to fill in the shadows of Stewart's youth and young adulthood. Those of us who extol Stewart's magnitude have been waiting for precisely such a book. Waters uses past scholarship with great respect—particularly Marilyn Richardson's *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer* and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*—and builds on their work, weaving in new evidence that provides the full cultural biographical context that Stewart deserves. Waters' *Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought* makes the argument that Stewart is one of the most important thinkers to whom America has given birth. The philosophic crux of Waters' book optimistically comprehends Maria Stewart as a unique voice and force shaped by, and exploding, the narrow boxes of multiple oppressions: "Decades of servitude and a formidable intelligence combine to produce a brilliant intersectional theory of race/class/ and gender oppression. Stewart's focus on the twin threats of excessive labor and educational deprivation unveils a longstanding playbook for subjugation" (Waters 12).

The book is structured into twenty-five short topical chapters arranged in chronological order. Following an introductory overview, the first six chapters reconstruct Stewart's early life in Connecticut, featuring some of Waters' most significant original research and synthesis. Chapters seven to fifteen concern Stewart's relocation to the vibrant free Black community in Boston and her marriage to James Stewart, whose global experience and knowledge as a seaman proves vital

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[1] Waters, Kristin, *Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought.* U of Mississippi P, 2022.

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to Waters' argument for Maria Stewart's internationalism. These themes expand exponentially in chapters sixteen through twenty, where the productive flowering of Black radical thought in Boston is seen through the work of David Walker, Black Masonry, and Black churches, all of which influence Stewart. The final five chapters, twenty-one to twenty-five, read Stewart's own writings and speeches against this richly woven tapestry. A postscript concludes the volume with the outlines of Stewart's long post-Boston life.

The title of *Maria Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought* makes a provocative claim for Stewart's pride of place in what Waters terms "Black revolutionary liberalism," a reworking of Lockean political philosophy from the perspective of an oppressed group suffering the contradictions of the young American Republic (Waters 161). Summarizing Charles Mills' and Carole Pateman's critiques of Rawlsian political philosophy, she analyzes how Maria Stewart anticipates these later thinkers in her ardent defense of the urgent need for resistance and revolt. Leonard Harris's category of "insurrectionist ethics" becomes a touchstone for Waters' analysis of Maria Stewart's political thinking (Waters 163, 216-220). Another key intervention that Waters makes through this study is her understanding that the work of scholars in our present era—especially for a white ally like herself—is to articulate through careful research how "Black revolutionary liberalism" constitutes "a distinct thread of thought from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries" (Waters 191). Stewart held sophisticated perspectives on political violence, gendered sexual violence, and the suppression of knowledge that Waters sees as "epistemic violence" (Waters 217). Understanding that her lack of educational privilege and her gender may have limited Stewart's access to formal political spheres, Waters observes that Stewart works around that in her understanding that "religious and political knowledge are one and the same," which means that "women may equally access political knowledge" (Waters 218). Waters also sees how Stewart extends her alliances across racial lines, directing "her appeal to whites, highlighting their power to create change" (Waters 228).

The feminist dimension is also treated with detailed attention, as Waters constructs an excellent train of Black women's thought in the years leading up to Maria Stewart, from well-known figures like Phillis Wheatley (Waters 169-172) to relatively unknown petitioners such as Elizabeth Freeman (Waters 134-137) and Belinda Sutton (Waters 166-169). As part of this, Waters accepts the hypothesis (from Calvin Herndon and Jocelyn Moody) that Maria Stewart is the author of the feminist letter published in *Freedom's Journal* in 1827 under the pseudonym "Matilda" (Waters 179). Highlighting the stylistic and thematic continuity with Stewart's writings, Waters takes the opportunity to re(de)fine the contemporary understanding of intersectionality away from "a hodgepodge of widely varying dimensions" to a centering of "Black feminist thought" (Waters 181).

Waters' biographical and cultural reconstruction is indebted to recent discoveries and technologies. Stewart wrote of her youth in a short piece only recently uncovered and attributed to her, "the First Stage of Life," written in 1860. Likewise, digital technologies made it easier to search through census records and city directories. Combined, these sources enable Waters to trace Stewart's life through her parents' identities and her childhood in Greenwich, Connecticut, adolescence in Hartford, and young adulthood in Boston. Since the marginalization of African-Americans and women means that written ciphers are always fragmentary (Waters 86), Waters readily acknowledges multiple possibilities for every interpretive step she takes. This results in a candid and scrupulous reconstruction of a puzzle that is still missing many pieces. Thus, this book makes research on Stewart by future scholars more possible because, like Richardson before her, Waters has planted sturdy guideposts.

One of the most significant aspects of Waters' reconstruction concerns the source of Stewart's knowledge of international affairs coming from her husband James Stewart and his sea-faring adventures. He served in the United States Navy in the War of 1812 and the Barbary War (Waters 64-83). Waters first points out how abstract Euro-centric philosophies ignore "the knowledge produced by common sailors whose concrete experiences were often more worldly than those of European philosophers" (Waters 78). She then adroitly ties this to Fanonian concepts of subjectivity and DuBois's "double consciousness" to describe "a critical reflective insight that allows for multilevel analyses unavailable to the oppressors" (Waters 78-79). The young Maria Miller "was deeply curious," and James Stewart "had an abundant cache of information to relate" (Waters 138). The eye-witness accounts that James Stewart shared with her (especially in the context of their growing intimacy) "nourished her voracious mind," forming a key "source of her sophisticated global understanding" (Waters 78), despite the fact that she never went outside of the United States. This is especially true in her understanding of the revolutionary importance of Haiti and its mistreatment by the United States and European powers (Waters 144). Waters makes a cogent comparison of Maria Stewart's prescient analysis of the Haitian Revolution to Anna Julia Cooper's in the early twentieth century by suggesting that Stewart had anticipated much of Cooper's argument, including a trenchant critique of the hypocrisy of colonialism (Waters 144).

Everyone who has studied Stewart has noted her intellectual and personal debt to the great David Walker, and here Waters herself has a fine mentor and colleague in reconstructing the life and context of a Black thinker—Peter Hinks's *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance.* The social history of Boston's Black community has been the subject of many scholarly studies by Hinks and others, which enables Waters to tease out religious, benevolent, and commercial influences on Maria Stewart, especially in chapters 10-14 (Waters 95-148). Waters demonstrates that Stewart followed and expanded Walker in "applying the Enlightenment concepts of liberal political theory to African-Americans, diasporic Africans worldwide, and in Stewart's case, to Black women as well," thereby creating an "enriched and recreated Revolutionary-era political theory, developing concepts specific to the African American experience, a *Black revolutionary liberalism,* an original, consistent, and universal application of Enlightenment ideologies" (Waters 212). Also, she makes a case for Walker and then Stewart bequeathing a nascent pan-African understanding to the Biblical verses concerning Ethiopia and Egypt (Waters 215).

The book has an episodic nature because of the short chapters, such that its full impact only becomes apparent on reflection. While the entire book merits praise, there are a few missing items. For instance, Stewart's imaginative re-working of the Scottish John Adams' (ca. 1750-1814) account of women's history is unacknowledged, which could leave a non-specialist reader with the impression that the words quoted are Stewart's, when they are actually a direct quote from his book (Adams 47). Adams was a prolific but decidedly shallow thinker; Stewart's animation and annotation of his compilation of famous women through the lens of her lived experience convincingly shows the adroitness of her intellect. Waters also elides the sexist disapproval Stewart felt within the Black community too cursorily (Waters 243-244). While I do not disagree with Waters' suggestion that Stewart's move to New York may have had multiple motivations, there is clear textual support for Stewart's departure being motivated by men's disapproval, when Stewart boldly inverts that oft-used cudgel of Christian male supremacy, Paul, declaring that the

Apostle "would make no objections to our pleading in public for our rights" (Stewart, *Productions* 75-78).[3]

It is disappointing that the book stops at the end of Stewart's public career, leaving many depths in her later life unplumbed, such as her connection to David Ruggles, one of the most pro-feminist of the Black abolitionists. Indeed, there are many aspects of Stewart's later activism that could have buttressed Waters' argument. Perhaps these untraveled archival and speculative pathways are tantalizing hints that Waters plans to pen a sequel on Stewart's later life in New York, Maryland, and D.C. I do hope so!

Maria Stewart is arguably among the most important American thinkers, abolitionists, and feminists who remains stubbornly unknown outside of scholarly circles. The way to change Stewart's visibility is through the kind of detective work, scholarship, and full-length study that Waters here produces. It is high time for us to recognize the brilliance of those who survive oppression, who can take "the negative psychological repercussions of externally imposed racism" and transform it "into a steely, enlightening (that is, knowledge producing) posture" (Waters 11).

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[3] See also Giddings, pp. 52-53, and Rycenga, p. 48.